

COOKING WITH WILD GAME

VOLUME
9

Author: **EDA**

Illust: Kochimo



VISIT...

LANZAROTE
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"HMM, GIBA MEAT, HUH?
I'M SURPRISED THERE ARE
REALLY PEOPLE OUT THERE WHO
WOULD EAT THAT STUFF! I MEAN,
IT'S WELL KNOWN FOR BEING SO
TOUGH AND SMELLY THAT
IT'S PRETTY MUCH INEDIBLE,
RIGHT?"

HIS VOICE WAS PRETTY HIGH
AND FEMININE SOUNDING, TOO.
IN FACT, BETWEEN THAT AND
HIS CUTE FACE, I'D DEFINITELY
MISTAKE HIM FOR A GIRL IF YOU
PUT HIM IN A SKIRT OR
SOMETHING.

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WITH JUST THE TIP OF HIS SWORD, HE HAD FLICKED BACK THE HOOD OF OUR FLAILING ATTACKER, REVEALING THEIR FACE. AND INSTANTLY, MY VISION WAS DRAWN BY A BRILLIANT RED.

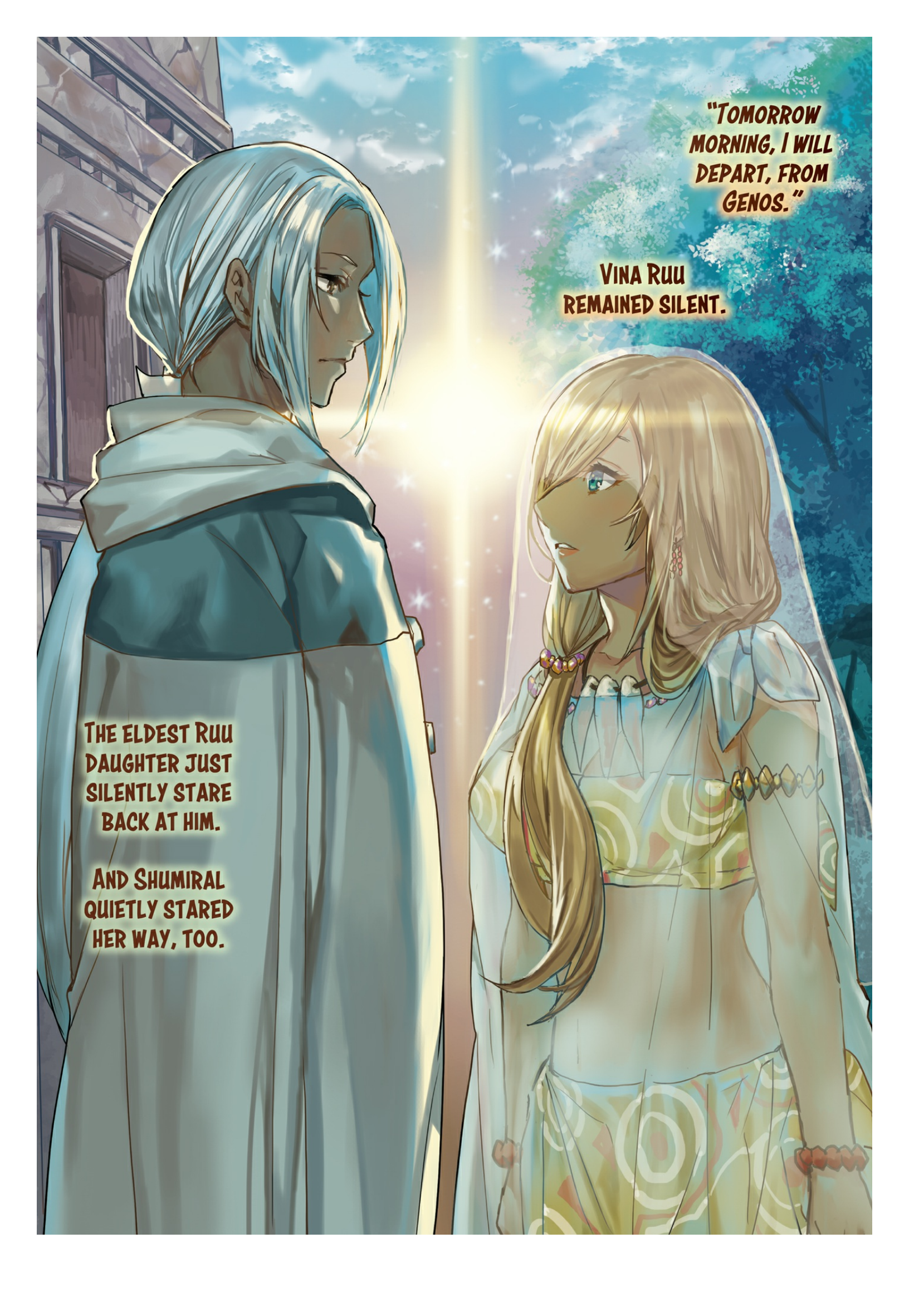
OUR ASSAILANT WAS APPARENTLY EVERY BIT AS MUCH OF A REDHEAD AS LALA RUU.

WITH THAT, THE LITTLE ATTACKER WHO HAD BEEN WRITHING ON THE GROUND SAT UP WHILE HOLDING THEIR LEFT SHOULDER.

"YOU'RE CALLING ME A BANDIT?! DON'T MESS WITH ME, ASSHOLE!"

THAT WAS A BOY'S VOICE, AND IT SOUNDED FAR YOUNGER THAN I HAD EXPECTED.

HOWEVER, HIS FACE LOOKED INCREDIBLY FIERCE.

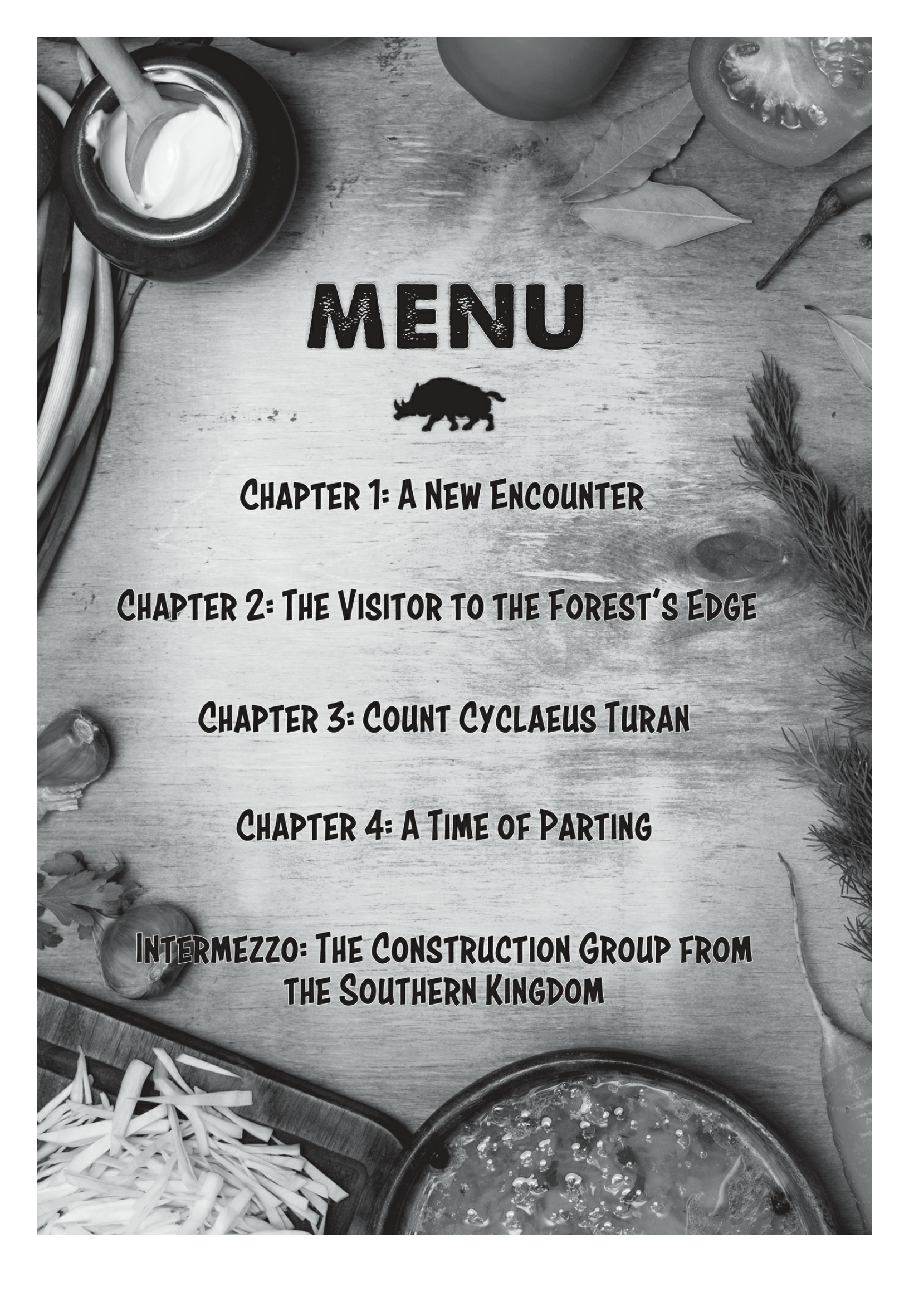


**"TOMORROW
MORNING, I WILL
DEPART, FROM
GENOS."**

**VINA RUU
REMAINED SILENT.**

**THE ELDEST RUU
DAUGHTER JUST
SILENTLY STARE
BACK AT HIM.**

**AND SHUMIRAL
QUIETLY STARED
HER WAY, TOO.**



MENU



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Chapter 1: A New Encounter

1

The day after the Ruu festival of the hunt, on the 28th of the blue month, some new visitors showed up at our stalls.

It was my 31st day of doing business in the post town, making it also the first day of my fourth contract.

During the first round, for my initial ten days of business, it had all been trial and error. On the first day I had only prepared a mere ten giba burgers, which made it plenty clear just how nervous I had been about the whole affair.

But the earnings during those ten days far and away exceeded my expectations, so I brought on four helpers and opened a second stall, and by the end I was preparing and selling 170 meals in total. Of course, nearly 80% of my customer base came from the south and east, but those were still absolutely crazy results.

The second round was even crazier, though. The clan head meeting at the Suun settlement came midway through, and then after that there was the whole incident with Zattsu and Tei Suun, which built up distrust between us and the folks from the castle, and caused discord among the townsfolk too, adding a whole lot of trouble alongside my usual business. And to top it all off, things ultimately ended with bloodshed.

Though I felt timid about starting the third round, it actually turned out a lot more peaceful than I had expected. We surprisingly became the owners of several totos, and I ended up doing business with not just The Great Southern Tree but also The Sledgehammer, making for some real positive changes overall. And even though our relationship with the folks from the west remained unstable, it at least seemed to hold steady.

Our sales had returned to around the same level they had been before that incident, and we didn't have folks throwing rocks at us or anything. Plus, we

seemed to be getting more questioning stares than the usual ones full of fear or scorn, which I actually took as a positive change. After all, the townsfolk wondering just what sort of folks the people of the forest's edge really were felt like the first step towards reaching a mutual understanding.

Those were the thoughts running through my head as we started our fourth contract, only for *them* to suddenly show up.



“Huh?! A giba stall? Hey, is this seriously giba meat?”

That first statement wasn't anything all that unusual. In fact, it was pretty much the standard reaction for people coming across the stalls for the first time. And so, rather than worrying about it, I just replied, “Yes, that's correct.”

What did throw me for a loop, though, was the guy's appearance.

It wasn't as if he was wearing a particularly odd outfit. I had seen plenty of folks from the south in similar sleeveless vests, cylindrical-legged pants, and short, hooded cloaks.

His hair was cut short and was a sort of speckled dark brown, his eyes were a bright green, and his skin was light with a bit of red to it. The way that his hair color wasn't quite uniform reminded me of a dog or a cat or something and seemed a bit unusual, but other than that, everything about him was pretty normal for southerners.

The first thing to throw me off, though, was his age. I really couldn't tell what it was for certain, but he couldn't have been older than me, at least. I'd say he was 15 or 16 at the absolute most.

Even if it wasn't as far as the Eastern Kingdom of Sym, the Southern Kingdom of Jagar certainly wasn't close enough to just come and go lightly. From what I heard, the northernmost town of Jagar and the closest one to Genos was Nellwea, where Balan of the construction group came from, and even that trip took around half a month.

And it wasn't just a long trip, but a dangerous one, too. Most journeys in this world meant risking your life to some degree, thanks to things like attacks by wild beasts and bandits, as well as natural calamities. And so, you not only

didn't really see women, kids, or old folks from other nations in the melting pot of cultures that was the Genos post town, young folks in general were also rare.

Well, it was hard to tell how old folks from Sym were from their faces, and it wasn't like I hadn't seen people from Jagar around my age, but they certainly seemed to be pretty uncommon overall.

This boy in particular looked awful young. Oddly slender, too.

Those were the two main points that had drawn my attention.

He's gotta be less than 160 centimeters tall. Well, I guess that's not too small for a southerner, though...

That was to say, the standard for folks from Jagar was to be both short and well built. They gave off the complete opposite impression as the tall and lean people of Sym, instead having short limbs but a robust physique. And even when they were around my age, they would have an impressive brown beard, making them feel like the dwarves you often saw in movies and games.

But this youth didn't have any beard, nor was he stout. Well, even if he did have a beard, it really wouldn't fit him anyway. He had the big, wide eyes common to southerners, but his nose and cheeks were all slender and girlish, giving him a rather cute face overall. I was used to younger folks with androgynous looks from around the forest's edge, but this youth seemed like he'd end up the kind of pretty boy to make all the ladies swoon in just a few years.

Fitting to that face, his body was incredibly slender, too. In particular, his white exposed arms and his waist with a sash around it were thin enough to be a match for most girls his age.

Honestly, I'd say boys with a face this pretty are rare no matter where they're born.

As I thought that to myself, the boy lightly strode over towards the stall and glared at the hot myamuu giba atop the iron tray.

"Hmm, giba meat, huh? I'm surprised there are really people out there who would eat that stuff! I mean, it's well known for being so tough and smelly that it's pretty much inedible, right?"

Yup, those sorts of statements were pretty common from folks from the west and south. However, his voice was pretty high and feminine sounding, too. In fact, between that and his cute face, I'd definitely mistake him for a girl if you put him in a skirt or something.

What mattered right now, though, was business. And since Lala Ruu was maintaining a polite silence next to me, I went ahead and offered a friendly explanation of, "That's certainly not the case. I'm sure that reputation comes from people who have eaten giba meat that wasn't properly prepared. But when it's cooked right, I believe it's every bit as tasty as kimyuus and karon."

"That's no way that's true! Hey, Labis, he says he cooks with giba meat! Isn't that crazy?! I really can't understand how anyone would want to eat that stuff!"

Realizing the youth had a companion, I went ahead and followed his gaze. And sure enough, there was an older, but still young man in similar clothing standing diagonally behind him.

This other man was firmly built like I expected for someone from Jagar, but he was actually pretty tall, too. He had more than half a head on the boy, so he must have been right around 175 centimeters tall.

He had dark brown hair, green eyes, and white skin. I pegged him as being around 20 years old. And he had a real tough chiseled face and firm chin, just like I was used to from folks from the south.

However, he didn't have a beard, either. So apparently, there really wasn't any custom for men from Jagar to all grow them.

"Hey, Labis, how about you give some of that giba meat cooking a try? It'll make for a good story to tell the folks back home!" the boy called out with a teasing grin. As for the man named Labis, he shot back a sour look.

"Is that an order, Master Diel? If so, then I am not able to refuse that request," the man replied in a deep voice.

He seemed pretty unexpressive for someone from the south, but I could still sense a touch of discomfort and contempt from him.

Master Diel, huh...?

It was definitely rare to hear people addressed that way in the post town. And now that I thought about it, looking closely, their clothing may have been mostly ordinary, but it seemed sort of high quality somehow. The designs were the sort you saw all around, yet stuff like the embroidery around the collars and cuffs, the beautiful colors of the dyed fabrics, and the splendid sheaths for their short swords made it clear what high class goods they were.

They... don't quite seem like nobles, but they'd definitely be more in place inside the stone walls than out here in the post town.

At any rate, perhaps because he didn't care for that Labis guy's response, Diel furrowed his brow and retorted, "You're so boring, ugh!" The boy may have been born wealthy, but he was completely lacking in terms of refinement and manners.

"Giba meat really is tasty, though. A lot of my customers from the south are quite fond of it, so would you care to give it a try?" I asked while holding out the plate of samples, which hadn't seen much use lately.

What I got back, though, was a sneer and a, "Are you kidding? You really think I would eat something like that? I mean, the only good thing about the cooking here in the post town is that it's cheap. And since we're talking giba meat of all things, I wouldn't eat the stuff even if you paid me!"

"I see. That's unfortunate."

I don't know if he let that slip or what, but it seemed they really weren't staying in the post town. Whether they were stopping in on their travels or were on their way to the castle town, they weren't the type of people to have anything to do with folks like me.

In that case, I wanted to ask them to just leave, but for whatever reason they just kept on standing there.

"Hey, you're a westerner, aren't you? What's somebody from the west doing going into business with people of the forest's edge? Aren't you all supposed to hate them?"

With his slender arms on his thin waist, the boy Diel shot me a haughty look, his eyes such a brilliant green that they almost looked like jade.

“Is it really that unusual...? The people of the forest’s edge are citizens of the west who offer up their souls to Selva, too.”

“That’s just how things are on paper! Besides, it’s not like they’re smart enough to properly worship a god anyway, right? Just hurry up and answer my question already.”

He really was a ridiculously rude kid.

However, apparently that level of badmouthing wasn’t enough to move the people of the forest’s edge, as Lala Ruu just kept looking aside and acting like all this had nothing to do with her. As for me, I just had to bury my revulsion deep down inside and keep on going.

“I don’t really know how to properly answer that. While it’s true that I wasn’t born a person of the forest’s edge, I was accepted into a clan and live there now. And while living there, I simply ended up starting this business.”

“Hmm, that’s weird! And can’t you cut it out with speaking all formally? I mean, you’re older than me, aren’t you?”

This again? I thought to myself with a mental sigh.

“I don’t believe that age has anything to do with it, considering the circumstances. I simply don’t feel right speaking in an impolite manner towards customers.”

“I’m no customer, though. You’ve got nothing to worry about, since there’s no way I’ll ever buy your giba cooking!” the boy stated with a big grin.

If I covered my ears, it’d probably make for a pretty darn adorable smile, but as things stood, I could feel the stress building up inside.

It was then that a group came from the north as if to soothe that frustration. Naturally, it was the Silver Vase, led by Shumiral.

“Welcome! I’ve been waiting for you, Shumiral!”

“You have...?” the youth questioned, tilting his head a bit as he removed his hood and revealed his silver hair.

With that I entrusted preparing the myamuu giba to Lala Ruu as I moved a massive bag from near my feet to the side of the stall.

“Here’s the jerky I promised you. And you have my deepest apologies for cutting it so close to the appointed date.”

It was the 40 kilos of jerky that Shumiral had ordered from me. Originally I had planned to hand it over to him a bit earlier, but the jerky prepared by the Sudra hadn’t come out quite right... Or to be more accurate, they used a good bit more herbs than the other clans, which left a strong flavor that wasn’t all that pleasant and so we had to remake it in a hurry.

It really did make sense for the flavor to vary from clan to clan. And so, that was my screwup for not realizing such an obvious fact. Thanks to that, I ended up teaching Li Sudra the proper herb balance as she cried tears of gratitude, and we fortunately managed to somehow finish in time.

After checking the contents of the bag, Shumiral’s eyes happily narrowed.

“Thank you. Here are, the coins.”

With that, he paid me 60 white coins.

As was the convention when doing business, I counted them in front of Shumiral.

Diel was still standing there, and let out a disinterested sounding, “Huh... You sure are doing well for yourself. For a merchant from Sym, that is. You approached from the north, so do you do business in the castle town, then?”

Shumiral turned to face the lad, still looking perfectly calm.

“Yes. I am, Shumiral Zi Sadumtino, of the Silver Vase.”

“You don’t have to give me your name. I’d never give mine to someone from Sym, after all,” the boy replied while sticking out his tongue obnoxiously. Even I couldn’t help but feel annoyed upon seeing that.

“Um, this man is both a customer of mine and a precious friend. Could I please ask you not to act so rudely towards him?”

“What, so you side with guys from Sym? Well, I guess they’re pretty much the only ones who would eat something as smelly as giba meat.”

I drew in closer to him without even thinking, only for Shumiral to gently stop me. Then, he turned to face the youth with the rebellious look burning bright in

his green eyes.

“Let us, not fight. Easterners and southerners, fighting in the western kingdom, is forbidden.”

“Hmph! Then you guys should turn tail and head on back to the eastern land already! Jagar’s had a longer relationship with Selva than you! And when you go around looking all high and mighty like that, it really pisses me off!”

Ever since I started running the stalls in the post town, there was a dangerous feel in the air between Aldas’s group and the Silver Vase. However, they were able to keep the peace through the unspoken agreement that neither side wanted to interfere with my business. But verbal arguments between citizens from the enemy nations of Sym and Jagar certainly weren’t rare in general.

I could definitely understand all that in my head, but that didn’t mean I felt okay with it. And that went even more so when it came to seeing someone one-sidedly attack Shumiral.

“My apologies... We, will leave,” Shumiral said with a small bow my way.

I hurriedly bowed deeply back in a fluster.

“There’s nothing at all for you to apologize about, Shumiral. I mean, on top of not being a customer, that person seems to be pretty darn rude, too,” I said, naturally whispering the back half.

As he glared our way, the boy impatiently stamped his feet.

“It is fine. Thank you, for the jerky.” After handing the bag of dried meats to one of his comrades, Shumiral then accepted his myamuu giba from Lala Ruu and went to turn around. However, he somewhat awkwardly stopped in the middle of that motion. “Asuta... Is Vina Ruu, not present?”

“Ah, that’s right! I really went and forgot something important there! You see, Vina Ruu hurt her foot while working around the house, and so she can’t come to the post town right now. From what I heard, she should be able to walk again in two or three days, though...”

Apparently, when cleaning up after the banquet yesterday, one of the branch house women disassembling the makeshift stoves accidentally almost dropped

a large stone on Rimee Ruu's feet. Vina Ruu had been standing next to the girl and managed to swiftly scoop her up in time. However, the momentum proved too much and she fell, twisting her ankle in the process.

I was a little late in mentioning it, but Reina Ruu was currently standing in the giba burger stall in her sister's place as a pinch hitter. Even if they were blood-related sisters, there was still no mixing them up for one another even at a distance.

With that, Shumiral returned to the stall and leaned in over the iron tray.

"Are Vina Ruu's, injuries serious...?"

"Ah, no, there's apparently no problems with the bone or anything. And even now, she can manage to walk by leaning against a wall. So I'm sure she'll be back to work within three days or so..."

But today was the 28th day of the blue month. That meant three days from now was the 31st... the final day Shumiral's group would be spending in Genos. They were apparently already scheduled to head out for another town the day after, so if he missed her on the 31st, Shumiral would end up not getting to see Vina Ruu again.

The young man closed his mouth and cast his gaze downwards. His expression hadn't shifted in the least, but he somehow looked quite sad regardless.

"I understand... Thank you."

With that, Shumiral really did leave.

I gave a deep sigh, and then noticed Lala Ruu opening her mouth as if she wanted to say something. But before she could, that boy from before butted in.

"Geez, everyone from Sym is just so tedious! I wouldn't want anything to do with them even if our nations weren't enemies! What in the world do you find enjoyable about dealing with guys like that, anyway?"

"...Shut up. You're being way too rude, hassling my customers while I'm working," I finally snapped back.

Actually, this was a pretty clear case of him obstructing my business, wasn't it? And Milano Mas was always warning me that for the sake of keeping peace

in the post town, I should report anything that happened to the guards rather than trying to cover it up.

But for some reason, the boy was now shooting me a really satisfied smile.

“Ah, you’re finally showing your true colors! It’s way better when you just do that instead of trying to act all weirdly polite, isn’t it? At the very least, I like it better that way.”

“I don’t exactly care about what you like. Could you just get out of here already, or am I going to have to report you to the guards for obstructing my business?”

“Hey, Asuta, calm down,” Lala Ruu chimed in, an annoyed look on her face as she tugged at my sleeve. “There’s no point to interacting with people like that. And fighting can’t lead to anything productive, either.”

I was fully aware of that too, of course. It was important not to get into fights with customers, so as not to give ammunition to those who’d say that the people of the forest’s edge are nothing but a group of ruffians.

However, I couldn’t help but wonder if this boy was here to deliberately try to pick a fight.

The fact that he had ties to the castle town was really bugging me. After all, that man Cyclaeus who was the representative for the lord of Genos was still a complete mystery. But there was no shortage of nasty rumors about him, so there was a definite possibility that my business was an eyesore for him, since he seemed to see the people of the forest’s edge as a group for him to rule over and little else. If that was the case, I felt the need to deal with this all right and proper, using the laws of the post town.

“The guards, huh? The guards in the post town are all nothing but underlings though, right? I can’t imagine any of them being able to do anything to me.”

“Oh? Are you a noble or something, and they can’t go against you? If so, then I can’t see what business you’d have with such piddly little stalls.”

“Of course I’m not a noble. I’m just a child of a merchant myself. But it’s not like I’m low enough to go and eat something like giba meat, though,” the boy said with a grin. It was a cute smile like I’d expect from a girl, but it had a real

nasty feel to it.

“What’s going on here? Are you in some sort of fight or something, Asuta?” a voice chimed in, signaling the arrival of some more customers.

It was the construction group from Jagar, led by Balan and Aldas.

“Ah, welcome. And no, this is nothing. Thanks for your continued business, as always.”

“You’re not making a face like it’s nothing, but whatever... At any rate, hurry up and get them made already. I’m starving to death, here.”

Had they just finished their work for the morning? At any rate, they were wiping off their sweat while standing in line, seven in front of the myamuu giba stall and five by the giba burger stall.

And of course, Diel didn’t just stand there quietly after seeing them arrive.

“Hey! You’re eating giba even though you’re from Jagar? What in the world are you thinking?!”

“Huh? What’s with you? You sure are dressed up neat and tidy, aren’t ya? You know if you go walking around the post town like that, you’re making yourself a target for no good punks, right?” Pops said while turning towards the boy and lifting one eyebrow.

As for Diel, he turned and pointed his thumb at the guy standing behind him.

“I’m not scared of any punks. Despite appearances, Labis here is a master swordsman. He even captured three bandits all on his own just a little while ago!”

Ah, now that he mentioned it, that guy did have a long sword in addition to a short one. But maybe because I was so used to dealing with folks like the people of the forest’s edge, Kamyua Yoshu, and Melfried, I wasn’t exactly feeling overwhelmed by him.

Pops looked Labis over, then gave a, “Hmph. I don’t really care all that much, but you’re pretty darn haughty for someone so young. Are you from the capital or something?”

“No, I was born in Jeland.”

“I see. I’m from Nellwea, myself. Jeland... That’s a town of ironsmiths with a mine, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. My family sells ironware, and we’ve been doing business in the Genos castle town,” Diel replied. There was a peaceful air now, completely different from how things were before. However, he apparently didn’t intend on leaving things like that. “Hey, Mr. Nellwea, what are you thinking, eating giba meat? You don’t look like you’re especially short on funds or anything...”

“What does that have to do with wanting to eat giba? I mean, it costs the same as karon cooking anyway. In fact, it costs even more when it comes to eating dinner at the inn.”

“Oh? Then why not just eat karon instead?”

“Karon’s good and all, but giba’s tasty too. And you can only eat it here in Genos, so I decided to keep on having it,” Pops bluntly responded as he gave a heavy sniff of the meat I was heating up.

“I don’t believe it! There’s no way giba’s tasty! You must have had some nasty sorcery cast on you or something, right?” the boy shot back, furrowing his brows.

Aldas had remained silent up till now, but he gave a hearty chuckle and chimed in, “Only folks from the east use sorcery. And if that stuff could make you feel this happy, then I’d be all for it. If you don’t believe us, though, then give it a try yourself.”

“No way, I don’t wanna eat giba meat,” the boy retorted, looking away. However, when Pops started chewing away on the piping hot myamuu giba, his gaze wandered back on over. “Is that really tasty...?”

“Yup, it is.”

“Hmm...”

“If you want to eat some, then buy your own.”

“I don’t want to eat any stinking giba meat!” Diel shouted, only for his stomach to audibly gurgle. When he held his belly and his face turned red, the construction workers broke out in amused grins. This was giving me some

serious deja vu. “N-No, this is just... It’s the scent! The myamuu scent’s just making it smell tasty!”

“Right, giba meat goes real well with myamuu,” Aldas replied with a smile, only for another of the group to chime in with a grin too.

“The cooking here really is the best. But I think I like the stuff from the inn even better.”

“That’s because that dish uses tau oil! Ah, but I’d really like to try some grilled meat with tau oil, too.”

“And if you used myamuu that’d be amazing, don’t you think, Asuta?”

Myamuu was an herb that greatly resembled garlic, while tau oil was a condiment akin to soy sauce. And naturally, they both paired great with giba meat. Oh, and the giba dish using tau oil they were discussing was the cubed giba meat stew that I sold to The Great Southern Tree.

“Well, I’ve prepared grilled meat using myamuu and tau oil back home. And I’d say they still go real well with the giba meat, even using both at once.”

“Ah, no fair! If you have a dish like that, then you should sell it, too!”

“I still haven’t quite locked down how to best prepare the dish, though. It doesn’t feel like enough to just grill it. Plus, using tau oil increases the costs quite a bit.”

“Ah, right, that stuff costs a lot here in the west, even though it’s cheap back in Jagar... It really makes me want to cry, thinking how we’ve just got three more days to eat your cooking.”

“I really appreciate the sentiment. I’ll certainly feel sad to see you all leave, too.”

This construction group was also scheduled to return back home to Jagar at the end of the blue month. In some weird twist of fate, their schedule was synched right up with the Silver Vase. And so, the thought of having to say goodbye to both groups on the exact same day seriously made me want to cry.

“Well then, we’re off! I’ll be looking forward to dinner too, alright?”

“Of course. And thank you again for your continued business.”

With that, Pops and company headed back to work, leaving behind just the two beardless young folks from Jagar. Seeing Diel standing there with a frown caused me to give another sigh.

“So, how long do you intend to keep on standing there like that...? If you don’t like the food in the post town, then why not head back to the castle town already?”

“Shut up! Don’t go giving me orders!” the boy yelled, only for his stomach to give another grumble. His face went bright red and he glared at me. “Hey, is giba meat seriously tasty...?”

“I certainly think it is. More so than karon legs or kimyuus, at least.”

“Karon leg meat is cheap stuff.”

“That’s what I hear. But here in the post town, that’s the only karon meat available.”

Diel seemed to be thinking too hard to respond.

“Hey, you—” I started, intending to finish with, “these stalls will be crowded soon, so could I ask you to please leave already?” only for a loud shout of “Alright!” to cut me off.

“Hey, make a bet with me!”

“A bet?”

“If that giba meat really is tasty, then you win. But if it’s gross, then I win. And then the loser has to hand over a white coin!”

“Why?! You shouldn’t be wasting money on stuff like bets!”

“Oh, shut up already and grill the meat,” the boy snapped back, grinning away and looking quite pleased with himself.

If we could see eye to eye just a little better, then I’d probably be able to see him as a charming yet mischievous kid like Ludo Ruu or Rau Lea, but perhaps thanks to how he was born and raised, I just couldn’t stand him. Still, I may have been overthinking things in suspecting the boy was a spy sent by Cyclaeus. After all, if he just wanted to interfere with my business, there had to be plenty of simpler methods to choose from.

Still, I remained on guard as I nodded and said, “Alright. I’ll go ahead and prepare it. However, I can’t go using these coins solely based on my own discretion, so I would want to make the bet something different.”

“Hmm? Then what were you thinking?”

“Let’s see... How about if I win, you stop talking so rudely towards my customers? I’d prefer it if you saved your badmouthing of the people of the forest’s edge and folks from Sym for when I’m not around.”

The boy narrowed his mischievous eyes and replied, “Hmm... Sounds interesting. Then if I win, you’ll call me Master Diel. But keep talking to me casually, though.”

That was certainly a childish idea. But well, it was hard to say I was being all that calm and logical myself. At any rate, it was just about time to make more anyway, so I lifted up the bag full of meat and answered, “Alright.”

“This is stupid. You’re seriously wasting your cooking on something like that?” Lala Ruu asked in an exasperated tone. “How can you win a bet against someone who’s free to just say they don’t like it?”

“Well if I’m really up against someone that shameless, then I guess I’ll just have to sound extra sarcastic when I’m saying ‘Master Diel.’ And besides, we usually have ten or so extra myamuu giba left each day anyway. It’s still not something to go wasting frivolously, but that doesn’t feel like what I’m doing here.”

Just how would my giba cooking come across to a rich guy with a refined enough palate to hate food from the post town in general? I really couldn’t help but feel curious.

And at any rate, it didn’t seem like he would stop interfering with business until I let him eat some anyway, and if he didn’t like it, that may just lead to him losing all interest in the stalls in general. At the very least, this way seemed far preferable compared to just arguing with him forever.

And so, I cooked the meat and aria that had been steeped in a marinade of myamuu and fruit wine over a medium flame, then sandwiched it between baked poitan alongside some diced aria. And as I prepared the myamuu giba,

the boy kept on staring at me with a look of great satisfaction. As for the young man waiting behind him, though, he just stood there silently with a sour look on his face.

“Thanks for waiting. Now go ahead and eat up.”

“Hmm... Well, it really does smell good, at least,” the boy said in a snotty tone as he grabbed the finished myamuu giba. Then, without showing any of the hesitation from before, his healthy-looking white teeth bit down into the poitan.

As I braced myself for the first abuse I’d hear towards my cooking in a while, the boy’s gaze dropped downwards as he chewed. With his face now hidden, he silently took a few more bites and finished eating the myamuu giba.

“So, how was it? Did you not like it after all?”

The boy didn’t respond.

“Hmm?”

“It was delicious...”

I was seriously glad to hear that, but his voice was trembling quite a bit when he said that.

“Master Diel?” the young man behind him called out, placing a hand on the boy’s shoulder. However, Diel brushed that hand off and hurriedly stepped forwards, not stopping until he was around the stall and standing right next to me.

“W-What is it?”

The boy was even smaller and more slender than I was, but he had a short sword hanging from his waist to protect himself. I started to backpedal, worried that he may have flown into a rage and been moving to cut me... but then his slender white fingers firmly grabbed a hold of my collar.

“That was incredibly delicious,” Diel stated, slowly lifting his head and revealing a broad grin full of admiration. “I’m sorry. I was in the wrong. It was so good that it left me at a loss for words... Your name was Asuta, wasn’t it?”

“Y-Yeah, that’s right.”

“It was so delicious... You really are amazingly talented, Asuta,” he said, twisting the fabric of my t-shirt even tighter. “Asuta, will you forgive me? I never imagined giba meat could possibly be *this* tasty. You must have thought I was a real fool for saying such delicious meat was hard and smelly.”

“No, that’s not true, but... Um, could you possibly remove your hands?”

“Ah, sorry! I got worked up, there!” Diel shouted out, letting go of my collar and jumping a step back. Plus, his face was turning red as he stood there looking all bashful.

This sure is one heck of an about-face...

Well, that was a good thing in and of itself. People from the south tended to be really frank, so maybe it wasn’t all that odd for him to be letting out his feelings directly enough to throw me for a loop.

However, it still felt strange somehow.

As he stared up at me with his face red from embarrassment, he looked unbelievably adorable. In fact, it was enough that I could feel my heart pounding in my chest.

Ah, hold on! I don’t swing that way, right?!

This had to just be some sort of backlash from how much he was insulting me at first. And besides, with a face like that looking up at me while appearing a bit embarrassed, of course I’d find him cute even if we were the same sex... or at least, that was what I was telling myself.

“Um... So will you forgive me?”

“Huh? F-Forgive you...?”

“I said rude things to people who are important to you, didn’t I? That was because I don’t care about the people of the forest’s edge, and Sym is an enemy of my nation, but... For you, that must have been incredibly annoying, right?”

“Y-Yeah, yeah, I forgive you. Just try to refrain from doing that in the future, alright?”

“Really? I’m so glad,” Diel replied with a cheerful smile.

The sun was approaching its peak, and it was causing his unusually colored hair to shine. His eyes were a clear sparkling green like jade, and his lips, unusually small and soft looking for someone from the south, were giving a happy grin. It was a pure, adorable smile that made him look like an angel.

“You’re an unusual man, Asuta... I just saw people of the forest’s edge doing business alongside all the westerners and thought I’d come tease you a bit, but I never expected something this surprising to happen. Hey, where are you from, Asuta...? Do you have some blood from the east, perhaps? Folks from Sym are usually the ones with black hair and eyes, right?”

“U-Um, I actually wasn’t born on this continent. I come from an island nation called Japan, so—”

“Huh?! You came here from overseas?!” Diel questioned, his eyes opening wide in surprise as he pressed in close again. He looked serious now, but that didn’t do anything to play down how cute he was. In fact, when that strange, cynically defiant side of his retreated, he just had a youthful adorableness left to him. “Now that I look closer, your skin color’s just like a westerner’s, but your face looks different. In fact, your eyes look almost a bit girlish.”

“Y-You’re one to talk! You look way more like a girl than I do!” I retorted without thinking, only for Diel to look taken aback.

“I look like a girl...? That’s a strange thing to say, Asuta.”

“Ah, sorry. That was just a slip of the tongue. But still, we were both being rude, right?”

I just couldn’t seem to get my thoughts back in order.

But as I tried to explain myself in a panic, probably looking like a total fool, he just said, “Pff... Bwahaha! You really are a weirdo!”

“You think?” I asked back.

Then in the next instant, sparks seemed to fly in the back of my eyes and nose, and I fell over without even knowing what had happened. However, I was soon pulled right back up by Diel gripping my collar tight again.

“Huh...?”

Diel's face was beet red, but it looked to be from anger rather than embarrassment this time around. He had just been smiling like an angel, but now his eyebrows were raised and there were wrinkles around the top of his nose, making his wrath readily apparent.

"Listen here! I know I'm not the most girly around, but I'm still a woman!"

With that, Diel launched another relentless right hook into my left cheek.

My first meeting with the wealthy merchant's daughter from Jagar, Diel, turned out to be a truly unforgettable one.



2

“You really didn’t realize she was a girl, Asuta?” Lala Ruu questioned, looking completely and utterly astounded. “I really don’t see how you could see her as anything but a woman! Right, Reina?”

“Yes, truly.”

“What about you, Sheera Ruu? You knew, didn’t you?”

“Yes. She certainly didn’t look like a man to me.”

“And Li Sudra... Ah, you weren’t here yet.”

“That’s right. But just when I arrived, an angry southerner came out from behind the stall. If that’s who we’re talking about, well... I’m sorry, Asuta, but she didn’t look like anything other than a young girl to me.”

Li Sudra didn’t especially need to apologize there. The only thing here worthy of embarrassment was my own ignorance.

All of our work was done for the day, and we had just returned the stalls to The Kimyuus’s Tail. That happened to leave us with a bit of time to kill, and so we were having that conversation while hanging out in the alley between two inns.

Actually, it honestly felt more like an attack than a conversation at this point. But I had needed to head for The Sledgehammer not long after the girl I had mistaken for a boy had left, so it was little surprise that I was getting it now.

I would’ve been good if we just skipped this step, but unfortunately Lala Ruu’s sharp tongue showed no signs of stopping anytime soon.

“I seriously can’t believe you! It really is no wonder she slugged you! And I feel like a real fool for worrying about you, too!”

“Hey, you can at least worry a little. I mean, wasn’t I already punished for my crime back there?”

A few hours had passed since then, but my left cheek was still throbbing away. I probably had some cuts in my mouth too, so I made a mental note to

skip using any spicy chitt seeds in tonight's dinner.

"At the very least, she was older than I am. Man, just imagining being treated like that is enough to get me mad. That was a real insult, saying something like that to a woman."

"I'm telling you, I was just caught up in the preconception that there weren't ever any foreign women in the post town. I mean, have you even seen girls from Jagar or Sym before, Lala Ruu?"

"That's got nothing to do with it. A boy would never have a face that pretty."

"You think so? I mean, I'd say Shin Ruu's got a pretty nice face, for example. Don't you think so too, Lala Ruu?"

With that, the young girl's face went red and she hit me with a liver blow to hide how embarrassed she was feeling.

I really was getting beaten an awful lot today. And it was extra sad too, as I definitely brought it all on myself.

"Hmph! I thought for sure you knew she was a girl, and you were just trying to use the chance to ogle her! I mean, you got your face up all close to her, after all. And I'm sure it made you feel good to hear her go on and on about how good your cooking was, right?"

"Come on, that's ridiculous. I thought she was a man back then, so of course I wasn't ogling her."

"Ah, so you would've if you knew she was a girl? Hmm, should I let Ai Fa know about—"

As she was saying that, I worried that my clan head herself would show up with the worst possible timing. And so, I hurriedly tried to cover Lala Ruu's mouth only for a husky voice to call out from behind me, "What were you saying about me?"

I turned around as a cold sweat ran down my back, and sure enough found Ai Fa standing commandingly there, holding Gilulu's reins.

"Sorry for the wait. I didn't catch any giba today, and ended up having to head a bit further out to set up traps."

“A-Ah, that’s fine! Sorry for making you come all this way after you worked so hard on the hunt.”

“It’s nothing... So, what was all this about ogling?”

“E-Er, I was just ogling some nice ingredients earlier, thinking I might want to buy them!”

“Sounds interesting,” Ai Fa replied, a very clear look of doubt in her eyes.

Before Lala Ruu could go and say anything unnecessary, I hurriedly bowed my head and said, “Well then, good work today, everyone. Since Ai Fa’s here now, we’re going to go buy a wagon. And Reina Ruu, you really saved us today. Thanks so much for that.”

“Ah, no, the Ruu and the Fa clans have an agreement for us to lend you help, so it’s only natural. And besides... I think that I gained a lot from today, too.”

I had also asked Reina Ruu to assist me with the work at the inns rather than Lala Ruu or Li Sudra. Even though they had more experience manning the stalls, Reina Ruu was more skilled when it came to cooking techniques. That impression of mine turned out to be absolutely correct, as she worked even harder than Vina Ruu even though it was her first day on the job.

“I’ll be helping out until Vina’s injury is healed, so I look forward to working with you from tomorrow on, too,” Reina Ruu added, breaking out in a truly brilliant smile.

With her strong desire to learn new techniques, she really seemed to have leveled up quite a bit over the course of the day. I simply couldn’t keep myself from trembling with excitement at the thought that I’d have to keep on improving too if I didn’t want her to overtake me.

“Hmm...? Do you have some sort of business with me?” Ai Fa suddenly asked in a questioning tone. And when someone suddenly stepped forward from beside her, I was even more shocked.

“Shumiral? What in the world are you doing here?”

“Asuta... I have a request, to ask, of you all.”

That caused me to feel a bit uneasy for some reason, and so I hurried over his

way.

The reason for that concern had been Shumiral's voice. Normally it was calm and composed, but now he was panting and close to out of breath. And when I got close enough, I even spied a bit of sweat clinging to his brow.

"I am, sorry... I am tired, from running. I am glad, to have found you."

"What is it? Do you have some sort of urgent business with us?"

"Yes... Would it, be possible, for me to go, to the forest's edge?" I was completely taken aback. Meanwhile, Shumiral's dark eyes glanced over both me and the women. "I am worried, about Vina Ruu... Could I meet, with her?"

"So you're saying you want to come see her because of her injury? You'd come all the way to the forest's edge?"

"Yes."

Completely at a loss for words, I turned around and looked at the women standing behind me.

Lala Ruu was whispering into her elder sister's ear, looking a bit tense.

As for Reina Ruu, she was clearly deep in thought as she walked up beside me.

"Man of the east, I am the second daughter of the main Ruu house, Reina Ruu. Vina Ruu is my elder sister, related to me by blood."

"Of course. I am the leader, of the merchant group, the Silver Vase, Shumiral Zi Sadumtino."

"Shumiral, is it? Understood. Well then... Why exactly is it that you're worried about Vina Ruu? What is she to you?"

"We have, no special bond. I am, simply concerned."

"So you're not claiming to be her friend, then?"

"Yes. She sells food, at the stall, and I buy it. That is all. We are, not friends."

"I see..." Reina Ruu said, her gaze drifting downwards. "As long as they don't have any wicked thoughts in mind, no one is forbidden from entering the settlement at the forest's edge. You're free to come to the Ruu house if you

please. However, our clan head is the one who will determine whether or not we'll welcome you inside as a guest."

"Yes, I understand."

"Well then, I'll pass your request along to our clan head and Vina Ruu. Do you mind waiting until tomorrow to hear their response? Then if the clan head gives his permission, we can escort you to the Ruu settlement."

"Yes, thank you. I am, in your debt," Shumiral said, joining his fingers together as he expressed his gratitude toward Reina Ruu.

As for the second Ruu daughter, she just gently, calmly smiled back.

"I can't say I understand why a foreigner like you is so concerned about my sister, but as a member of her family, I definitely wish to offer you my thanks for those feelings. Well then, I'll see you again tomorrow... Asuta, it looks like we'll be heading back ahead of you."

"Right. Take care, everyone."

Reina Ruu had a more childish feel about her than Sheera Ruu or Ama Min Rutim, but she seriously impressed me with how politely and properly she acted there.

But at any rate, the three women exited to the main road, leaving just me, Ai Fa, and Shumiral standing there.

"Shumiral, you must've really worked up some serious resolve to say you want to come visit Vina Ruu."

"Yes. I was, worried about, doing so. But I would hate, to end up, not seeing her, again."

Honestly, I was surprised to find out that he had been brooding over the matter this much. I obviously noticed that he had feelings toward her, but just as he had said, they were nothing more than a customer and saleswoman, and had hardly even gotten to talk to one another. And on top of that, Shumiral wasn't a westerner and would even be leaving Genos in three days, so I really hadn't been expecting their relationship to suddenly develop further.

But in that case, maybe even now Shumiral wasn't aiming to get closer to her.

It was certainly possible that he really was just worried about her and wanted to see her, and was acting on that.

As those thoughts ran through my head, Shumiral just gently stared back at me.

“I will not, cause you, any trouble. You do not, need to worry.”

“Ah, I wasn’t concerned about that in the least. It’s just... The Ruu clan head is one of the leaders of the forest’s edge, and he’s also a seriously intense guy. There are probably a lot of differences in the way folks from the forest’s edge and easterners think, so just take care and keep that in mind, alright?”

“Right. You have, my thanks.”

Ai Fa had remained silent up till then, but she suddenly called out to Shumiral, “This may be the first time in the 80 years our people have lived there that an easterner has stepped foot in the forest’s edge. You were the one who asked me to protect Asuta during that whole commotion with the Suun clan, weren’t you? I remember that silver hair of yours.”

“Yes. My name, is Shumiral Zi Sadumtino. You are, Asuta’s clan head, Ai Fa, are you not?”

“That’s right. I’m Ai Fa, clan head of the Fa. As long as you don’t break the laws of the forest’s edge, I can’t imagine any of our people will try to do you harm. But just remember, if you do break them, you’ll be punished even more harshly than had you committed a crime in Genos.”

“I understand.”

Shumiral was going to visit the settlement at the forest’s edge... I had never even imagined such a day would come. Honestly, it made me feel both glad and uneasy at the same time.

“Shumiral, if you get permission from the Ruu clan head, then let me accompany you too, alright? I know you better than anyone else at the forest’s edge, so that should help things go smoother in a variety of ways.”

“Is that not, a hassle for you, Asuta...?”

“Not at all. In fact, I was concerned about how Vina Ruu was doing too, so this

works out perfectly,” I answered with a smile, and Shumiral happily narrowed his eyes. “Well then, I guess this is goodbye for today. After all, we’ve got to go stop by a craftsman’s shop and pick up the wagon we ordered.”

“Right. Thank you. I will come, to your stalls again, tomorrow.”

“Got it. And thanks for your continued business, too. Are you ready to get going then, Ai Fa?”

“Hold on. There’s something I still need to ask about before that.”

“Huh?” I questioned, wondering if she still had something further to discuss with Shumiral as I turned to face her.

In the next instant, though, she firmly grabbed hold of my jaw and drew her face in close.

“Where did this injury come from, Asuta...?”

“I-Injury? I’m not injured, though...”

“You can’t fool me. The corner of your mouth is cut, and your left cheek is red. That’s from someone hitting you, isn’t it?” Ai Fa questioned, her eyes burning bright as my jaw creaked. “How did you end up suffering such injuries? Did you go acting recklessly again where I couldn’t watch over you, Asuta?”

“Ow! You’re gonna shatter my jaw! And I wasn’t reckless at all! I just got into a bit of an argument, and got a little shove at the end of it!”

My jaw hurt and Ai Fa’s face was way too close to mine. This distance was just too much for me today.

Last night, as all sorts of emotions ran through my head, I had hugged Ai Fa tight. And with so little time passing since then, naturally the warmth and disorienting sensations I felt were still quite vivid in my memory.

Ai Fa gave a serious frown, then let go of my jaw and kicked me in the leg. I thought I saw her face turn a bit red as she faced away as usual, but I didn’t have the strength left in me to confirm. Actually, more than that, it felt like if I did see it, then I’d end up beet red too. And since it was still the early afternoon there was plenty of traffic in the area, which meant I’d really prefer to avoid that sort of embarrassment.

“Anyway, we’ll be going. See you again tomorrow, Shumiral!”

“Yes,” Shumiral replied with a nod, his gaze somehow looking even gentler than usual. And he looked really happy about something, too... It was a really affectionate gaze, like he was also giving something his blessing.

Thanks to that, I only ended up feeling all the more bashful, with the blood seriously rushing to my cheeks.



The craftsman’s workshop was located in the southern portion of the post town.

The one-story building with its tall roof had all sorts of lumber lying about in piles, and really did feel a lot more like a workshop than a store. And as I stood there awash in the smell of wood shavings, I couldn’t help but let out an impressed, “Ooh, this sure is something!”

I was staring at a huge wagon that had been pulled out from the back of the building. And man, it certainly was worthy of admiration.

“Well, it is the toughest and biggest one-totos wagon that we make, after all. As long as you don’t go and do anything too crazy, it should last for five or even ten years.”

The owner of the workshop was a middle-aged man with a real hearty craftsmanlike feel about him. He looked to be around 40 years old and was around the same height as me, but he had a pretty robust build. His eyes and hair were dark brown, while his skin was a golden shade. He had some cloth around his waist and was wearing leather sandals, but didn’t have anything else on.

There were a number of similarly dressed westerners about sawing away at lumber, putting pieces together, and pounding metal into it. Apparently this workshop didn’t just make wagons, but also other wooden goods like cabinets, desks, and chairs.

“Come back once a month so we can inspect the wheels, though. Well, unless you don’t mind getting stuck in the middle of the road, that is.”

“Once a month? Alright, got it. Thank you very much.”

“You’ve got no reason to thank me. I was just telling you how to properly handle it so you don’t come back to me with complaints in the future,” the owner bluntly responded while tugging on his scraggly dark brown beard.

He didn’t seem all that fond of the people of the forest’s edge, but at the same time he seemed to be able to separate himself from that when it came to business. And so, he reminded me of how Milano Mas was not so long ago, which actually helped me warm up to him.

But at any rate, the wagon was in front of us now. It was shaped like one of those old covered wagons, with a rectangular bed, four wheels, and a large cloth canopy stretched overtop. As for the measurements, I’d say it looked to be about 4 meters long, 2 meters wide, and 2.5 meters tall to the top of the roof.

There was a simple driver’s seat installed at the front, as well as two long rods for attaching the totes. The cloth roof arched overtop, and peering inside, I saw it was supported by what looked like eight wooden ribs.

It was primarily constructed out of wood, but metal was also used here and there throughout. For example, there was a v-shaped bit of metal between the wheel axles and the body, so perhaps that made for some sort of suspension. The overall construction of the vehicle was simple, but it had a sort of functional beauty to it that really spoke to the skill of the craftsmen.

I had certainly seen this sort of wagon a lot around the post town. However, it was my first time staring at one up close and personal, plus it was all new and shiny, so I was feeling seriously impressed. And Ai Fa’s eyes had gone wide too, showing that she couldn’t fully restrain the curiosity and admiration she was feeling.

“It certainly looks big, seeing it up all close and personal like this. What’s the maximum number of people that can ride in it?”

“Including whoever’s in the driver seat, it would be six or seven. Don’t go too fast when you’ve got over three folks in it, though. After all, you could easily end up hurting your totes by pushing it too hard.”

If that was the case, then I could carry along the tools we needed for the stalls as well as all five workers. Add that to the wagon itself, which had to be easily over 200 kilos, and all told, it really was impressive just how strong tolos were.

“And this here’s the harness. Pay careful attention to how it goes on, so you can adjust it yourselves. The leather will stretch bit by bit as you use it, so you’re sure to need to readjust it in the future,” the oldtimer stated as he started wrapping the leather band around Gilulu’s round torso. And as that was going on, Gilulu was shooting him a bit of a questioning look. “Hmm... No matter how agreeable a tolos may be, they always look to hate it the first time you put a harness on them... Has this tolos pulled a wagon before?”

“Ah, I’d have to check to be certain, but I believe so.”

If he really had been one of the tolos that Kamyua Yoshu’s fake merchant group let loose, then he definitely would have pulled a wagon back then. Did he not have a harness on back when they found him because it came loose as he was wandering about the forest...? Or maybe Kamyua Yoshu’s group cut them free before the giba could get them by slicing those bands.

The man then attached the metallic fittings on the left and right of the harness to the two poles coming from the front of the wagon, completing the familiar tolos-drawn wagon look I was used to seeing around the post town.

Gilulu had the same blank expression on his face as always, but he still looked pretty darn majestic in spite of that. And I didn’t miss the pride that crept across Ai Fa’s face, either.

“Then, there’s the leather crop. Your legs won’t reach the tolos from the driver’s seat, so you have to hit it with this instead of kicking it,” the owner stated while holding out the item in question.

It was cylindrical like the riding crops used in horse races, and looked to be made by stretching the leather atop grigee wood or something. And it was about two centimeters thick and a meter long, with a small sort of spatula-like shape affixed at the one end.

“What is that...? You couldn’t possibly be thinking of hitting Gilulu with that, right, Asuta?” Ai Fa questioned, giving me kind of a scary look.

As I checked the flexibility in the crop, I turned and went, “Huh? Yeah, well I guess that’s the plan. You heard the explanation just now too, didn’t you? It’s in place of giving him a kick.”

“But if you hit him with that, won’t you hurt him?” Ai Fa asked, her eyebrows rising in a way that made her expression look all the more dangerous.

“Ah, but if it’s just in place of a kick, then it shouldn’t hurt any more than that... Isn’t that right?” I questioned in turn, and the oldtimer nodded back.

The sour look on his face hadn’t shifted in the least, but I couldn’t help but feel concerned that he might hold some resentment toward Ai Fa for being a person of the forest’s edge.

“If you were to hit the totos hard enough to hurt it, then it’d probably run wild. You should hit it in the same spot and with the same amount of strength as if you were kicking it. They’ve got these splendid feathers here, so that shouldn’t hurt them in the least,” the oldtimer explained, patting Gilulu on the rear. However, as he did so, his eyes narrowed with suspicion again. “Hey, this totos doesn’t have a brand on it, huh?”

“A brand...? Ah, no, it doesn’t.”

Now that I thought about it, Kamyua Yoshu had said that the custom was to brand totos in order to mark who they belong to.

“Without a brand, you won’t be able to prove this totos belongs to you if it’s stolen, y’know. Well... I guess nobody would go after something belonging to the people of the forest’s edge anyway, but you can take care of it for just five red coins at a place that handles totos, so you should just go ahead and do it.”

“What’s a brand...?” Ai Fa questioned, sounding confused.

“A-A brand is a symbol you burn onto skin with hot metal. If we give him one, then Gilulu won’t go getting mixed up with other totos,” I hurriedly explained, figuring it would be bad if Ai Fa’s anger was turned toward the owner.

Instantly, Ai Fa shouted out, “You can’t! I would never mistake Gilulu even without such a thing! I’ll never accept the idea of branding him!”

Perhaps because he had just heard his name so many times in a row, Gilulu

was tilting his head from atop his long neck and bringing his face in close to Ai Fa's. In no time at all, she cradled his head in her arms and shot me a look filled with both anger and sadness.



“You won’t accept it...?” I repeated while holding back a sigh, then looked over at the oldtimer. “Um, this toto’s previous owner didn’t brand it, so it’s not against the laws of Genos not to have one, right?”

“Yeah, that’s all up to the bird’s owner. After all, you’re the only one who will lose out if it runs away or gets stolen... However, it’s proper manners towards other toto riders to make sure your reins and harness at least have an easy to see symbol on them. After all, people tend to use those to tell totos apart rather than the brands.”

“Symbols, huh? I see,” I replied with a nod, then turned around only to find my beloved clan head digging around inside her leather cloak. What she pulled out was a familiar sort of necklace filled with giba horns and tusks.

Ever since I started my business with the stalls, there had been no need for Ai Fa to exchange the horns and tusks she earned for coins. It would get in the way far too much to put them all around her neck, and so she had been storing the excess in her cloak’s inner pockets.

Anyway, Ai Fa removed three horns and tusks and strung them along a fresh leather string, then wrapped that around Gilulu’s neck.

There was a custom among hunters of the forest’s edge to give women such necklaces as a wish for them to live happy and healthy lives. I actually wasn’t totally certain if Gilulu was a boy or a girl, but he was a member of the Fa clan regardless, and it felt like a rather tasteful gift.

Ai Fa gave a satisfied stroke of Gilulu’s long neck, and then puffed out her chest with pride.

“This should do, right? I certainly won’t accept branding him either way, though.”

“I got it, I got it. No complaints here. I had already vaguely felt that way, but you sure are overprotective of your family, huh?”

“Quiet, you,” Ai Fa replied, patting Gilulu on the neck and looking relieved to have avoided that danger.

“You sure are an odd pair...” the oldtimer grumbled. I was a bit surprised by

the tone in his voice so I turned around to look, and found him ruffling his brown hair and giving an awkward grin. “I really don’t get you people of the forest’s edge. First I think you’re a group of intimidating ruffians, but then you go wailing like children... Hey, you all run some stalls here in the post town, don’t you? I’ve only heard rumors, since I spend pretty much all day here in the shop.”

“Huh? Rumors?”

“Yeah. There was some bloodshed just a little while ago that even the folks from the castle got mixed up in, right? It was something about the people of the forest’s edge cutting down one of their own criminals, wasn’t it?”

I was suddenly at a loss for words.

The oldtimer was shooting me a look that said he was trying to feel me out.

“Up till now, the folks from the castle overlooked crimes by the people of the forest’s edge. Whether it was causing a commotion in town or wrecking stalls... Heck, word was they could even get away with murder. And then that incident suddenly came out of nowhere. Did the folks from the castle abandon you all?”

“I wouldn’t quite put it that way. I’d say it’s more that the people of the forest’s edge are citizens of Genos too, and they’re now working hard to show that and make sure the western kingdom’s laws are properly followed.”

I really hadn’t expected that question in the least, and so my answer came out pretty awkward there.

“Hmm... So you all actually intend to follow the laws of the west, then?”

“We do! Actually, it was only a handful of people at the forest’s edge who broke those laws, and all of them have either been punished or are waiting to face judgment!” Zattsu and Tei Suun were gone now. Zuuro Suun, Diga, and Doddó were currently prisoners. And as for everyone else... “Ah, but what exactly will be done about the people who laid hands on the blessings of the forest still needs to be deliberated with the folks from the castle. They were only acting under orders from the previous leader of the forest’s edge, so we’re hoping things can end peacefully...”

“The blessings of the forest...? Ah, I guess there was a law about that. That

was just made for the people of the forest's edge, though. Us townsfolk would never go near that giba-filled forest in the first place, after all," the owner replied while waving me off with his thick hand and sounding a bit annoyed. "Anyway, I don't care about all that. What matters is your relationship with the folks from the castle. Us townsfolk can't do anything to defy them. If one of them says black is white, then as far as we're concerned, it's white. But they pretty much never come out from behind the stone walls, so they don't really have much impact on our day-to-day lives. The real issue is the idea that the people of the forest's edge are strutting about town, free of any worry about getting judged for their crimes."

I suddenly noticed that Ai Fa was standing right next to me. And currently, the oldtimer was looking her up and down with some serious wariness in his eyes.

"We've never had any people of the forest's edge wander into this workshop up till now. So honestly, this is the first time I've ever had a chance to have a proper conversation with any of you. Seriously, just what sort of folks are you?"

"I honestly don't know what to say to that except we're simply the people of the forest's edge. The lives granted to us involve little more than protecting the laws of the forest and hunting the giba of Morga."

"Hmph, that's a pretty formal introduction you gave, there. Nothing at all like how out of sorts you were earlier," the oldtimer replied, causing Ai Fa to pout. And upon seeing that childish expression, the man just grinned all the more. "Well, I guess that doesn't have much to do with someone who doesn't get out often, like me. The people with shops out on the main street who see you folks all the time may have a completely different opinion on matters, but I'll just have to hope for now that my new customers aren't big fat liars."

"Right. And we'll just have to prove our integrity to you through our actions from here on out."

"In that case, would you mind following the laws of the western kingdom and paying me for this thing? Taking off the 50 white coins you paid in advance, that leaves another 70, plus 7 for the leather crop and harness. So that'll be 77 white coins in total, my customers from the forest's edge," the oldtimer said with a big smile that showed off the white of his teeth.

“What did you think of what that woodworker guy was saying, Ai Fa...?” I asked while walking down the road behind Ai Fa and holding Gilulu’s reins as he pulled the wagon.

We were currently traveling down the path from the post town back toward the settlement at the forest’s edge. Since the path was thin, sloped upwards, and had tall, dense vegetation to either side that hindered visibility, we were taking things slow and going on foot.

It was the same route that Kamyua Yoshu’s group pretending to be a merchant caravan once took, so it wasn’t like it was *that* poor of a road, but since I was still a beginner at riding a toto, I’d probably end up scraping the canvas roof with a ton of the branches jutting out here and there. And so, we were taking it incredibly slowly, just walking along as Ai Fa cleared those obstacles out of the way with her machete-like blade.

My clan head’s cloak fluttered as she turned and shot me a questioning look.

“What do you mean, what did I think? I didn’t notice anything strange in that westerner’s words.”

“Yeah, in fact, I’d actually say he had a pretty favorable attitude toward the people of the forest’s edge. Maybe he didn’t have much in the way of preconceptions because he didn’t really have much interaction at all with your people, like he said,” I replied while carefully holding onto Gilulu’s reins so that he didn’t pick up any speed. “But the folks who run the businesses on the main street have a harsher opinion of us, right? Even though the incident with Tei Suun helped a lot at bringing things out in the open, it’s not like the core issue’s been resolved.”

“And what is this ‘core issue’?”

“Huh? That’s—” I started to say, but then stumbled at having been asked so directly.

The townsfolk now knew that it wasn’t as if all the people of the forest’s edge were vicious criminals, and they had also learned of the harsh conditions they were forced to live under... And they had to be aware now that the unjust

favorable treatment from the Genos elites had come to an end.

Of course, that information had come from the exchange between the people of the forest's edge and Tei Suun rather than any sort of official report. I figured that was why everyone was now shooting us such probing gazes.

Are these really savages who don't respect the law?

Has the way they've been treated honestly been that unjust? And if so, do they hate us for that?

Do the folks from the castle truly intend to judge them properly for their crimes from here on out?

Their gazes were all filled with such questions.

"I think that up till now, the townsfolk were stubborn about how they perceived things. Like, they saw the people of the forest's edge as villains that were best avoided, especially since the folks from the castle were in cahoots with them anyway."

"Hmph, with all the evils committed by the Suun clan, it's only natural that they think that way."

"Yeah. But that whole incident from before brought a lot of stuff out in the open, so I figure that's probably changed how people think a bit. It's sort of like a firmly shut door has now opened a little, and someone's peering through the crack."

"You're making me think of Rimee Ruu..."

I couldn't help but chuckle at the image. However, this was still a serious matter.

"Still, I guess the people of the forest's edge should just keep acting the same as always. I mean, if you all just keep doing so, eventually that'll prove your innocence... But isn't there anything else to be done?"

"I cannot say. Are you implying we should go parading about town shouting out that we won't go around doing bad things like the members of the Suun clan?"

"Hmm... Yeah, that probably wouldn't prove very persuasive... If the post

town at least had a mayor, we could try setting up a meeting between him and the leading clan heads...”

However, Milano Mas already told me that no such official existed. It was the Genos castle that was ultimately in charge of the post town, and the closest thing to what I was looking for were the nobles who lived in the castle town.

“Asuta, aren’t you overthinking the matter? Donda Ruu and the other clan heads are the ones who should be worrying about such things. Your job is to make delicious food and improve relations with the townsfolk, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, but Donda Ruu and them are pretty indifferent about the post town to begin with... And don’t you think that sort of indifference is another type of rejection? Even if it’s not as bad as the wrongdoings perpetrated by the Suun clan, I’d say it’s still one of the causes of the gap between the people of the forest’s edge and the townsfolk...”

“There’s no point to trying to tell someone to have an interest in something. And don’t you think people like Donda Ruu and Gulaf Zaza visiting town would just cause more terror?”

That was true, naturally.

To start with, it was generally the women who visited the post town for shopping, so men were rarely ever seen there. And so, the townsfolk hadn’t built up much of a resistance to seeing the brawny hunters of the forest’s edge, who were like wild beasts. Even setting aside Donda Ruu and focusing on gentler-looking hunters like Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu, they still had a totally different aura about them than the townsfolk. And so, it was no surprise that folks would feel overwhelmed seeing them walking about while carrying blades and wearing giba pelts.

“But Dora and Tara were able to deal with not just the women, but also guys like Ludo and Shin Ruu without being terrified. So I think as long as they interact, there will at least be a chance for them to open up. I mean, I wasn’t even born at the forest’s edge, but look how much I’ve been accepted.”

“That’s because you’re far too incapable of sensing when you’re in danger. I can’t imagine the townsfolk are anywhere near as carefree as you are.”

“But the people of the forest’s edge have a real strong desire to follow the laws, don’t they? So even someone as gruff as Donda Ruu wouldn’t ever do any of the townsfolk harm. That means that if we give it time, it should work out somehow, right?”

“Wouldn’t you say we’re in the middle of taking that time right now?” Ai Fa questioned, slowing her pace till I was walking beside her. Then, she shot me a serious glare. “Asuta, have you forgotten Kamyua Yoshu’s words? You’re surely the one who will serve as a bridge between the post town and the forest’s edge. You and the women of the Ruu clan... By coming to the post town day after day, you’ve been proving that the people of the forest’s edge aren’t all frightening villains. If it weren’t for that, we would never have reached the point that we have, even if the commotion with Tei Suun still played out the same. In fact, it likely would have caused them to fear us even more.”

“Yeah, I understand all that. But I mean, you were casually talking to that woodworker before too, right? At first he seemed pretty on edge, but he ended up opening up quite a bit, and I’d say that’s probably down to your personal charm.”

Ai Fa just glared at me rather than saying a word.

“Ah, wait, hear me out before you kick me! I swear that I’m not making fun of you! It’s just that I was thinking that the townsfolk weren’t exactly opposed to the nature of the people of the forest’s edge per se. For example, I’d imagine Gazraan Rutim or Dari Sauti would find it pretty easy to get someone to open up to them. And I certainly could see Dan Rutim happily drinking away with somebody.”

“Even so, I can’t ever imagine the men coming to town without any business they need to take care of.”

“Yeah, but doesn’t it seem like at this rate the townsfolk will never hear about important stuff like what sort of presence the Suun clan was at the forest’s edge, and how people felt about them, and how they reacted to their crimes? That thought sort of irritates me, to be honest.”

Even as I was saying that, I could clearly see that my words were rooted in my own personal doubts.

“At any rate, even when we’re talking about Genos, the post town and castle town are whole different matters. So for the people of the forest’s edge to form proper bonds, it’s necessary to have a good relationship with both of them.”

After listening silently to all that, Ai Fa finally gave a small sigh.

“Asuta, I’m sure what you’re saying is valid, but I still think that you’re worrying too much. The leading clan heads will soon be meeting with the folks from the castle. Until that’s dealt with, I don’t see a point to being concerned about such other matters.”

“Hmm? Yeah, I guess I’m overstepping my bounds by worrying about all that...”

“More than that, it feels... like you’re rushing ahead, somehow,” Ai Fa stated, bringing her face in close as we kept on walking. And once again, she was close enough that I could feel my heart pounding faster. “The people of the forest’s edge have been avoiding the townsfolk for 80 whole years now. In these past however many years, Zattsu Suun and his ilk only served to poison that relationship further. Even now that they’ve fallen, I certainly can’t imagine that would serve to solve everything.”

“Yeah, but I got the feeling that the explosive way that they fell made it a good chance to really turn things around with the townsfolk.”

“That’s what I meant about it feeling like you’re rushing ahead,” Ai Fa retorted, suddenly breaking out in a pout. That sudden surprise attack only caused my heart to pound all the faster. “Normally you seem more relaxed than anyone, but now and again you feel like you’re in a real hurry for some reason. I have to say, I’m not fond of that.”

“Y-You’re not?”

“Not in the least. It makes me think you’re trying to hurriedly clear up all the trouble before you disappear...” Ai Fa said in a sulky tone, tightly grabbing a hold of the fabric of my clothing. “Asuta, the Fa clan’s goal is supposed to be making it so that giba meat can be sold in the post town, bringing greater prosperity to the forest’s edge.”

“Y-Yeah, of course.”

“For that to happen, we’ll need a lot more townsfolk seeking out giba meat. Otherwise, that newfound prosperity won’t be able to spread throughout the whole of the forest’s edge.”

“Right, that’s definitely true.”

“It’s also important that a friendly relationship is forged between the people of the forest’s edge and the townsfolk of Genos. And so, it certainly isn’t improper for you to think hard on that matter. However... It will surely take quite some time before that can truly be accomplished,” Ai Fa stated, bringing her face in closer while still wearing a pout. “And so, you’ll have to remain as a member of the Fa clan working away in the post town until that long time passes. Don’t go thinking you can wrap up your work so quickly, you fool.”

“Ah, but if I *could* wrap things up quickly, that’d be a good thing, wouldn’t it?” I replied, only for Ai Fa to shoot me a displeased silent look.

For a second she reached out towards my shoulder, but her hand soon lowered.

Then, she glared up at me.

“Do you really think that’s what I wanted to hear from you...?”

“Ah, no, but—”

“Why must you keep trying to make me feel uneasy?”

Apparently despite my intentions, my words had gone and thrown Ai Fa out of sorts. And so, I hurriedly shook my head and replied, “That wasn’t what I was trying to do.”

It wasn’t like I was going and thinking something crazy like believing I could solve all of Genos and the forest’s edge’s problems before I disappeared. But it seemed like I was subconsciously rushing, thinking I at least wanted to see this matter in particular through before some ridiculous circumstances ripped me away from this world.

“Sorry. I was just hoping everything would play out in the best way possible. And so, I was straining the piddly bit of intelligence I’ve got to try to figure out what I should do to make that happen.”

Ai Fa didn't say a word.

"It's not like I think things with Genos can be settled that easily, and I know deep down that taking things slowly and carefully is the way to go. Right... It's dangerous thinking, to believe everything could improve all at once, huh? I really didn't think things through enough, and I'm sorry for that."

She still was keeping silent.

"I told you how I felt last night, didn't I...?"

That I want to stay by her side...

I had hugged Ai Fa tight as I said those words.

My heart was finally beating so fast that I thought for sure Ai Fa would notice it even without touching me... only for her to finally let go of my clothing and briskly walk back ahead.

"As long as you understand, then that's fine..." Ai Fa whispered, her voice just barely making it to my ears.

I racked my brain to come up with a decent response, but unfortunately we ended up arriving at the settlement at the forest's edge before I could think of anything clever. Though with that said, it wasn't as if the scenery around us had changed all that much. It was just that the dirt trail had grown flat and gotten a bit wider.

The path we were traveling ended in a t-junction stretching far to the north and south. It would take just five minutes traveling south to reach the Ruu settlement from here, and an hour heading north to make it to the Fa house.

"Alright, let's go ahead and finally give riding in the wagon a shot!" I exclaimed in the most cheerful tone I could manage, only to get back the usual "Right," from Ai Fa.

While feeling mentally relieved, I climbed up into the driver's seat. Ai Fa also got into the wagon, then leaned forward with her hands on the back of my seat.

"That looks pretty unstable. Are you going to be alright?"

"If I don't do this, then I won't be able to watch how you handle the reins," Ai Fa retorted, sounding like her mood had recovered quite a bit.

She was probably feeling excited riding in a wagon for the first time. When I looked up at that slightly childish gentle expression, I just didn't feel like worrying about such details anymore.

"Apparently there's not all that big of a difference compared to riding directly on the tolos. The reins work exactly the same, and the only real change is that you use the crop instead of kicking. And since you won't get thrown from the driver's seat unless you're suddenly going real fast and then abruptly stop, it's supposedly a bit easier than riding on the tolos's back... Or at least, that's what Leito said."

"Hmm... In that case, maybe even someone like you will be able to handle it as well as an average rider," my clan head, who had learned to manipulate Gilulu as if he were one of her own limbs in just five days, stated with a smile.

As for me, I was still at the point where I could just barely manage to slowly creep along on birdback. And so it was a real question just how skillfully I'd be able to handle this wagon, but I certainly wanted to give the challenge a shot.

"Alright, I'm going to get moving. It'll probably sway a fair bit, so take care not to fall, okay?" I said, raising the crop.

Instantly, Ai Fa called out, "Asuta... Make certain you don't hurt Gilulu."

"Got it," I replied, then gave Gilulu a slap on the leg.

Just like always, the large bird started slowly walking along.

While still holding onto the crop, I also grabbed the reins with my right hand.

The plan was to start with a normal walking speed. However, tolos walked a lot faster than humans, so that was still around 10 kilometers per hour.

As expected, we were getting a good bit of vibration even at this speed. It seemed like it'd probably be a good idea to have something to act as a cushion on the driver's seat, since it felt like this would really wear out the skin on my butt if it went on for too long.

"Still, this sure does feel nice."

It was good that I didn't feel like I was at any risk of falling, even moving at 10 kilometers per hour. And since the driver's seat was at the same height as

Gilulu's back, I was getting just as nice of a view as if I was riding on him directly.

However, it was then that Ai Fa's displeased voice called out from above, "This isn't fast enough to truly feel nice, though. Aren't you taking it a little *too* slowly, Asuta?"

"Yeah, I guess that's true. Normally I would have long since made it back to the house and started on work by now. So should I pick up the speed a bit, then...?"

I kept the reins at the same level of tautness with just one hand, then hit Gilulu again with the crop. That was the signal to change gears from a normal walk to a fast one. And I must have properly regulated how hard I hit him, as he soon picked up his speed by around 50%. Despite the fact that he was pulling a wagon with two people in it, his legs still seemed plenty strong enough to handle it.

"Looks like it's not shaking much harder. Are you alright, Ai Fa?"

"This is nothing," she replied, sounding like she was a bit closer than before. "More importantly, you're pulling too much with your right arm again, aren't you? The way you're holding the reins seems a bit distorted."

"Huh? Really?"

Ai Fa had pointed that out a number of times by now. Gilulu ran straight anyway in spite of that, but she still said, "That's because the path is straight, so he keeps heading forwards but feels a bit confused."

And that confusion was probably mentally tiring the totos out bit by bit, so I needed to learn to hold the reins properly. I had known Gilulu for just as long as Ai Fa had, but for some reason her words felt strangely persuasive.

"Your right arm is stronger, isn't it? In that case, it just makes sense that you need to hold back a bit on that side for them to be equal."

"Ah, but I thought I *was* using equal strength."

"Your arms aren't level either, to start with. Lower your right elbow a bit more," Ai Fa said from even closer than before, her fingers gently grabbing hold

of my wrist. And her hair was lightly brushing up against my right ear, too, causing my heart to skip a beat. “About this much should do it. Now, try relaxing your arm a bit further.”

By this point, her voice was coming from right beside me. Even though her face wasn’t touching mine, she was close enough that I could feel her warmth on the right side of my neck and shoulder.

“A-Alright, I’ve got it. Like this, right? That seems good, doesn’t it?”

“What are you acting so bewildered about...?”

“Ah, no, it’s just... I mean, don’t go making me explain it, you dummy.”

“Who are you calling ‘dummy’?” she questioned, grinding her head up against my temple. “And this is a necessary step, you know. Do you hate me touching you even at times like this?” Ai Fa asked, sounding more and more displeased as she talked. “From what you’ve said, you dislike touching skin even with members of your own house. I’m well aware of that fact. And I’ve tried to avoid making you feel uncomfortable over such matters, too.” The way she was phrasing that was more than a little off. After all, who would dislike having physical contact with someone like Ai Fa? “However, you yourself embraced me just last night, didn’t you?” It felt like she was trying to make me die of embarrassment. “It’s not like I wish to make things unpleasant for you, of course. However, this is a necessary step in showing you how to handle the reins. If even that is too much... Well, I can’t help but feel hurt.”

Ai Fa’s tone had shifted ever so slightly. Plus she had pulled back her head and fingers, though her voice and warmth remained right on top of me.

And so, as I managed the reins to guide Gilulu along a slight curve in the road, I gave a small sigh.

“Alright, let me go ahead and clear up the key misunderstanding going on here. Um, you see... I’m not shaken up by having you touch me because it’s unpleasant, but rather, er... Because I feel bashful.”

What a seriously idiotic discussion...

But still, we were born and raised in completely different worlds. With that in mind, it seemed logical that our common sense would differ, and I just had to

do what I could to correct that.

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘bashful.’”

“You don’t? I mean, we belong to the same house, but it’s not like we’re related by blood...”

“So that’s why you dislike me touching you...? I find it unpleasant for someone outside of my house to touch me, too.”

Ah, so that was why Ai Fa was taking my reactions as cold, huh?

I hurriedly racked my brains in a panic.

“Umm, but you don’t have a problem with Rimee Ruu or Granny Jiba touching you, right?”

“Of course not. They’re... They’re my precious friends,” she replied, quietly whispering that last bit. I seriously felt bad about making her say something so embarrassing.

“Then what about if you became friends with a man? You wouldn’t like them hugging you like Rimee Ruu does, would you?”

“Of course not. But that’s because Rimee Ruu is a young child. If a boy her age did the same, I wouldn’t find it especially unpleasant.”

“Yeah, but you wouldn’t be upset about Rimee Ruu hugging you even if she was a full grown adult, right?”

“I can’t imagine an adult ever doing something so childish.”

“You think? I could see it if we were talking about Rimee Ruu.”

Silence.

Undoubtedly, she had to be thinking something like, “I can see it.”

“Then let me ask you a question. If you became friends with a young boy like Shin Ruu’s little brother, and he still wanted to hug you at the age of 17, what would you think? It would feel more embarrassing than unpleasant, wouldn’t it?”

“That... that may be so... But you’re a member of my house, not a friend.”

“Yeah, but back in the world where I came from, even when people were raised together as family, they didn’t go about touching one another lightly,” I said, feeling a sort of déjà vu for some reason. And it didn’t take long for the source of that feeling to be stated into my right ear.

“I heard that excuse before. I believe it was prior to you starting work in the post town... When we were staying at the main Rutim house. You said something similar at that time, Asuta.”

“Man, how nostalgic. Still, I do sorta remember that discussion.”

“Yes, we had that debate while lying down to sleep.”

It had been over a month since then, so I was surprised to find she remembered it so clearly.

Just as I was feeling impressed by that fact, though, my neck was suddenly grabbed from the side. And since I couldn’t move my gaze from pointing straight ahead, that meant I was probably in a headlock.

“And back then, I believe I already told you that this isn’t your old home, but rather the forest’s edge. Now that you are a man of the forest’s edge, I believe it only proper for you to follow the customs of our people, Asuta.”

“Th-That may be so, but even families at the forest’s edge aren’t all over one another, right? I’ve certainly never seen that before, at least.”

“I can’t speak for other clans, as each house ultimately decides their own customs.”

That didn’t really sound like a logical argument, but maybe it was just me. At any rate, my neck and right shoulder felt unusually warm. And Ai Fa’s sweet scent that had been drifting away on the wind was instead now tickling my nose.

“T-That’s dangerous! I almost ran us into that tree!”

“Gilulu isn’t foolish enough to do such a thing,” she stated, her words accompanied by a warm sensation on my cheek. It was bad for my heart just imagining it, but that was probably Ai Fa’s cheek up against mine.

“You weren’t having unpleasant thoughts, were you, Asuta...?”

“Huh? Wh-What? Um, I really did almost have an accident just there!”

“I still don’t understand what you mean by ‘bashful’ in the least, but if I’m not causing you to feel displeased, then I’m glad.”

Suddenly, the pressure on my neck was tighter as her cheek pressed more up against mine. And she grabbed hold of my right wrist again, too.

“The amount of strength you’re using is off again. Don’t go getting all out of sorts, you novice,” Ai Fa stated with a chuckle.

Could anyone keep composed under these sorts of circumstances?! I wailed in my head.

And all the while, Gilulu just kept on firmly and swiftly walking down the path at the forest’s edge, knowing nothing of what was going on back in the wagon.

Chapter 2: The Visitor to the Forest's Edge

1

It was now the following morning.

When I rode on up to the Ruu settlement in the wagon, it ended up causing something of a commotion. Of course, I had been expecting that to some degree, since I had asked Lala Ruu and everyone to inform the rest of the clan. And so there were little kids shouting out excitedly and people staring with surprised looks, but nobody seemed to be judging us, so I figured that was fine.

Ultimately I stopped Gilulu by pulling on the reins before entering the settlement's plaza. Then I got down from the driver's seat and we walked on in.

"Welcome to the Ruu settlement, Asuta. It seems you're able to handle the wagon just fine after a day's practice," Sheera Ruu said, running over from her house.

"Yeah. I actually squeezed in some special training with Ai Fa this morning too, and so I managed to at least get the basics down. I should be fine even on the thin trails closer to town, as long as I take things slowly and don't try to rush."

Thanks to that, Ai Fa was probably gathering firewood and herbs all on her own around now. I felt bad about that, but she had also had an unusually high level of interest in the wagon, so I played into that, got up early with her, and together we did some training. When we finished that up and it was time for me to head out towards the Ruu settlement, she had looked really reluctant to step down from the wagon.

"From here on out, I'll pick everyone up and drop them off. I guess we should start by loading up the luggage from your house, Sheera Ruu. Though now that I think about it... I guess we don't need to borrow a pot from you guys anymore now that we have this wagon."

Since I got a hold of the iron tray, we ended up having to go to the trouble of

bringing the tarapa sauce I made to town in a leather sack, meeting up with Sheera Ruu there, and then transferring the contents into a pot that she brought. It had been too much to expect Vina Ruu to carry both the tray and the pot together, so we really didn't have any other choice.

But now, we could bring as much from the Fa house as we needed. In the wagon, I had a pot full of tarapa sauce, the tray for the myamuu giba, 60 patties, 90 meals' worth of meat soaking in marinade, and enough baked poitan for 60 dishes. And then, there was the meat for the cooking I'd be doing at the inns, and even two kilos of jerky.

Looking at it again, it really was quite a bit of luggage. And to think, just Vina Ruu and I were carrying everything but the pot day after day...

That did serve to build up my stamina, but I felt truly grateful for the fact that I wouldn't have to lug it all over that terrifying rope bridge anymore.

At any rate, Sheera Ruu added the baked poitan for the other 90 meals to the wagon, and then we headed over to the main Ruu house.

When we got there, we found Rimee Ruu waiting for us along with the toots named Ruuruu.

"Ooh, a wagon! This is amazing, Asuta!" Rimee Ruu said from atop Ruuruu's back as she had the bird walk over. She seemed to love toots just as much as Ai Fa, and had been practicing riding from early in the morning onwards. "It's so cool! But it looks heavy, too! Good work there, Gilulu!"

Of course, Gilulu responded with the same blank look as always, along with a slight tilt of his head. And Ruuruu just sort of stood there staring at Gilulu.

"Hello there, Asuta. Welcome to the Ruu settlement. This is all the firewood we've got for you today," Mia Lea Ruu called with a cheerful smile as she stepped out of the house to see what all the fuss was about. Reina and Lala Ruu had also circled around from behind the dwelling holding the large bundles of firewood, which brought our preparations to a close.

"Well then, let's get going. Everybody, please hop into the wagon." With that, Reina, Lala, and Sheera Ruu all excitedly did as I asked. And as I watched them out of the corner of my eye, I called out to Mia Lea Ruu, "Um, so does it seem

like Vina Ruu will still need some time to recover after all, then?”

“That’s right. Even if she could make it there and back in this wagon thing, having to keep standing on the job would still be too much for her. It looks like it really will be two more days or so till she can work in town again, like I told you before.”

“I see. Then about the easterner, Shumiral...”

“Well, for now we’re willing to welcome him into the house and have a look at him. The clan head and I will check him out, and if we feel satisfied, then we’ll let him meet with Vina.”

“Right. I’ll certainly vouch for the fact that he’s a trustworthy man, and I hope that you see him the same way.”

With a sigh of relief, I guided Gilulu on foot over towards the exit to the plaza. And as the wagon rolled along, the girls riding inside of it started getting excited.

“Well then, let’s get going. It’ll sway a bit, so take care not to fall, alright?” I said as I climbed up into the driver’s seat and gave Gilulu’s leg a smack with the riding crop. With that, the tolos started bobbing along. Despite all the weight he was now pulling, there wasn’t any change in his light and easy stride.

However, we had time to spare, so I kept Gilulu at a walk rather than a run.

On human feet, walking to the post town from the Ruu settlement took between 40-50 minutes, while it would be 20-25 for a tolos... But considering the narrow winding trail, it would probably be safer to make that around 30 minutes. Still, as long as I didn’t screw up, that meant we should get there a good bit earlier than usual.

“Asuta, you’re helping us out like this, but you’re still paying us the same amount? I just don’t feel right about that, somehow...” Sheera Ruu called out from behind. Since there was no divider between the driver’s seat and the wagon itself, as long as you just spoke up a little, having a conversation was no problem at all.

“Don’t worry about all that. The key point of the job has always been what happens while we’re in the post town, so you really don’t need to concern

yourself so much about what comes before and after.”

“Really? But it seems like this will cut down on the travel time quite a bit... If that means we’re going to be getting back to our houses earlier than usual, then I think I’d like to use that extra time to gather firewood.”

I could feel myself breaking out in a bit of a strained smile in response to how earnest Sheera Ruu was. However, I swiftly changed gears in my head instead.

“But the amount of firewood we pull in now should already be plenty. So would it be possible to leave a different task to you instead?”

“A different task? What do you mean?”

As we rounded a gentle curve in the path, I went ahead and revealed the plan I had previously thought up.

“Making the giba burger patties and the tarapa sauce... Either that, or cutting up the meat for the myamuu giba and making the marinade. I was thinking of leaving one or the other up to you, but what do you say?”

Perhaps feeling perplexed, Sheera Ruu didn’t say anything in response. Rather than rushing her for an answer, though, I simply waited.

“But... If I do that, then there wouldn’t be anything left for you to do on the dish, right...?”

“Yeah. In fact, that’s precisely the idea. It may take some time to actually see it through, but I was thinking I’d like to hand one of the stalls over to the Ruu clan to manage.”

Again, silence. And so, this time I decided to keep talking.

“I first had the thought a while back. You would need to enter into a contract with the inn owner, prepare the food, make sure the taste is just right, and figure out the net profits by subtracting out your businesses expenses. But if you can do all that without me, then all the earnings from the stall would naturally go to the Ruu clan.”

She still wasn’t saying anything.

“I still haven’t gotten Donda Ruu’s approval, though, so I’m certainly not trying to rush it. But I was thinking the first step would be having you memorize

how to prepare the dish. What do you think?”

“B-But why...? That would only decrease the number of coins the Fa clan can earn, so there shouldn’t be anything for you to gain by doing such a thing...” Sheera Ruu replied in a weak, trembling voice.

“That’s not true. If I can leave one of the stalls up to the Ruu clan, then that lightens my workload so I can focus on something else. And I’d been wanting to do more experimenting and studying for that...”

“Experimenting and studying...?”

“That’s right. If things go well I may end up offering my cooking through lots more inns, and even if that doesn’t happen, I’d still like to reexamine the dishes I currently prepare. The cubed giba meat stew just takes too long to cook, and the pickled chitt I’ve been using drives up the cost of the ingredients too much.”

“Right...”

“And then there’s the dishes for the stalls. Right now we prepare 150 meals each day, 90 myamuu giba and 60 giba burgers, but we always end up with ten or so extra myamuu giba, don’t we? With that in mind, I was thinking of bringing the number of myamuu giba and giba burgers down to 50 or 60 each and introducing a third dish.”

“Huh? You’re going to open a third stall?”

“Ah, no, that’s ultimately just one of the things I’m considering. And at any rate, I can’t increase my amount of prep work with things as they stand. So that’d have to wait till I hand over one of the stalls to the Ruu clan.”

Even setting aside the matter of the fees for the stall and location as well as personnel costs, increasing the number of stalls would likely end up decreasing my net profit. However, I still had a desire to try out new dishes bit by bit while still maintaining my current popular offerings.

If I could offer up 60 each of three different dishes, then that would allow more people than before to enjoy giba meat cooking, and maybe three stalls selling 180 meals would fall better in line with the surrounding shops than two stalls selling 150.

At any rate, though, our goal behind running these stalls wasn't to earn a profit, but rather to further spread the knowledge of how tasty giba meat is. The grand plan was to reach the point where folks wanted to buy the meat itself rather than just my cooking, so this was sort of like a presentation I was putting on to further that cause.

"I'm probably getting repetitive here, but I'm really not trying to rush it along. I mean, it's only just barely past a month since I started doing business in general. And things seem pretty up in the air in general right now, so I'd like to be careful in how we progress. But still... From what I've seen of how hard you all work, I really don't think it would be a problem to have you all take over one of the stalls."

And if the Ruu clan were able to handle running a business on their own, then even if I did happen to up and disappear, the plan to bring prosperity to the forest's edge could still carry on. Honestly, that was one of the reasons I had the thought in the first place.

Still, you never knew when anyone may die. Even without a background like mine, that was just common sense here in this world, so it certainly wasn't a bad idea in the least to put such preparations in place.

And besides, even though that was one of my reasons, it still wasn't the biggest one.

A month back, when Sheera Ruu first came to help out just five days after I started doing business, the thought just naturally occurred to me that with her level of skill, I could someday leave one of the stalls to her. And so, I was just now voicing the idea that had been simmering inside me for a month now.

Mia Lea Ruu had astoundedly asked me why I would go forward down a path that would only result in losses on my end. But the Fa clan's goal was to bring prosperity to the forest's edge. As clan head, Ai Fa most definitely didn't want us to just amass a fortune for ourselves.

When it was a job only I could handle, I would push myself as hard as possible. But I truly felt that if it was a task someone else could handle, it would be more effective to yield that to them and start working on something different.

And when someone possessed a certain strength, it only seemed right for them to be paid fairly to use it. And from what I could tell, that most certainly applied to Sheera Ruu.

“What do you think? Even putting aside all that talk of the future, it would seriously help me out if you could start by learning the preparations.”

“Ah, no, but I...”

“I don’t think there should be any issue at all in regards to your cooking skills. You can already make the tarapa sauce all on your own, and putting together patties was one of your specialties, wasn’t it? Of course, what’s important when doing business is making sure you can maintain the same taste day after day. So I’d probably want to give you some pointers there, too.”

Sheera Ruu didn’t say anything.

“Still, I guess it’d be easier to make the myamuu giba, huh? As long as you remember how to cut the meat, the rest should be simple. But if I’m being honest, it’d be a bigger help on my end if you took the giba burgers instead, since those take longer.”

“That would be fine! Hamburgers are one of my specialties, after all!” a voice responded with more enthusiasm than I would expect from Sheera Ruu. Which made sense, considering it had come from Reina Ruu instead. “Asuta, you use a stronger seasoning with the myamuu giba to match the tastes of the townsfolk, don’t you? So in that case, it would be more fitting to have the Ruu clan take on the burgers instead. I’d imagine it would be difficult having to make a dish in a way that seems less than ideal to us, after all.”

“Ah, I could see that.”

“Also, I think it would be tough on Sheera Ruu to ask her to single-handedly take over for you, Asuta. I would find that difficult to do, too. But with the two of us working together, I figure we could manage to work at least half as hard as you do!”

“You’re really overestimating me, there. With the two of you together, you should certainly be capable of making a tastier giba burger than I do, don’t you think?”

“I’d say *you’re* the one overestimating *us*, Asuta,” Reina Ruu replied, though her tone remained firm all the while. “I’m sorry for going and butting in there, Sheera Ruu. But I really would like to give it a try... To see just how far my skill can take me. And if we succeed, then we won’t just earn coins, but also the sort of honor Asuta gets for our cooking abilities.”

“Honor for our cooking abilities...” Sheera Ruu quietly repeated, her voice no longer trembling like before.

For a moment, the only sound in the air was the rattling of the wagon, but right around when the thin path leading to the post town came into view, she spoke up again.

“You’ll show us the ropes to help make up for what we’re lacking, won’t you...?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“In that case, I’d like to put my cooking skills to the test, too.”

Feeling glad to hear that, I replied, “Thank you,” and tugged on Gilulu’s reins to get him to slow down a bit.



Fortunately, we didn’t run into any issues even after arriving in the post town.

We were permitted to park tolos and wagons in the space behind the stalls. However, since tolos would eat leaves when tied up there, the rate for the space was increased by two red coins per day. I had some questions about the way the costs were laid out there, seeing as the space itself just cost one coin per day, but it was so cheap to begin with that I didn’t feel any need to get upset over it. And besides, checking Gilulu in at a proper tolos stable would cost three red coins for half a day, so it was still a lot more reasonable to do things this way.

But at any rate, business went quite smoothly.

The folks from the east and south all lined up in front of the stalls first thing in the morning, and once they started to dwindle off, westerners began appearing here and there. In total, the southerners and easterners each made up 40% of

my clientele, while the remaining 20% came from the west. And so, there was no real change in the ratio there, for better or for worse.

Of course, I really should feel grateful for the fact that I'm not seeing a big drop off after all that commotion...

Still, it felt like a bit of a stalemate for me in regards to the westerners.

The faces I had been seeing from the south and east had changed quite a bit over this past month. Naturally, there were longtime regulars like the Silver Vase and Pops's construction group, but I was getting plenty of customers besides them too.

Thanks to the reputation I'd earned at The Great Southern Tree and The Sledgehammer, newcomers to the stalls would frequently show up even as others left Genos. Selling my cooking through those inns really had a remarkable effect on that front.

On the other hand, I wasn't seeing much change in my western clientele. A number of them came from out of town for work, but the overwhelming majority were all residents, naturally.

In other words, of the roughly 30 or so western customers I got per day, nearly all of them were regulars who had been coming around for nearly a month now.

How many westerners lived here in the Genos post town to begin with? I honestly had no clue. I believe Ai Fa said it was several thousand at some point, but that was ultimately just shaky second-hand information.

From how lively the streets were and all the rows of houses stretching out to the west, it seemed clear it wasn't just one or two thousand. Even if it didn't reach all the way to 10,000, I'd certainly say "several thousand" seemed about right.

Of course, it wasn't like all the residents of the post town came out to the stalls to eat. The clientele around here ultimately all came from folks staying in the inns or working nearby. And even then, some of that crowd just chose to eat lunch at their inn instead.

Then just how big of a pie was there for me to take my slice out of?

I figured I could roughly calculate that out based on the number of stalls.

How many snack stalls were there in this vast space...? It couldn't be less than 50, at least. I'd probably put it at somewhere in the 60 to 70 range. And from what I heard, they generally sold between 20 to 50 meals per day. So the average would be 35 meals.

Roughly 60 stalls selling 35 meals each would work out to 2100 customers.

With that in mind, the fact that we were selling around 140 per day with just two stalls sure was something.

And so, the issue really did just come down to the ratios.

From what I could tell by looking at the traffic passing by, it really did seem like the majority of folks around were from the west. By my estimate, they seemed to make up somewhere between 60-70% of the crowd.

So based on my estimate of 2000 people, that would mean there were 1260 westerners or so. And bottom line, less than 30 of them came by our stalls. In terms of percentages, we'd be talking a piddly 2.4%.

For now, that was ultimately the most westerners I could get to come by the stalls without hesitation.

As for my foreign customers, I seemed to be seeing around 110 out of 840 coming by the stalls, or 13%.

Over one in every 10 easterners and southerners bought from me, while for westerners it was only about two out of a hundred.

Even though I was selling quite well, that was still a worrying set of circumstances for me.

Our location had been pretty secluded to begin with, and there was that whole incident ten days or so back. Yet in spite of that, this many people still kept on coming by to purchase my giba cooking rather than abandoning us. That was something to feel glad about, but still... I was finding it pretty difficult to determine just what my next step should be.

Ah, if I keep overthinking things like this, then Ai Fa will think I'm all in a rush again...

And so, I put a stop to my wild thoughts and calculations, just in time for there to be a tug on the sleeve of my t-shirt.

“Asuta, are you alright? We have a customer, you know...” Reina Ruu, who was working the giba burger stall alongside me, questioned with a look of concern.

I nodded back at her, and then lightly slapped my own cheeks.

“Sorry about that. I was just doing a bit of thinking, but now wasn’t the time for that. Welcome!” I said with a smile, only for my grin to soon fade.

There was a beardless youth from the south standing there and shooting me a sour look.

“Ah, hello... So what did you come here today for?”

Reina Ruu seemingly hadn’t noticed just yet, but it was the man named Labis from yesterday.

“I’ve come here today as a customer. Will you still sell me your cooking despite yesterday’s commotion?”

His expression looked displeased, but his tone and actions were all perfectly polite.

I glanced left and right, and when I didn’t see hide nor hair of that little troublemaker, I replied, “Of course. I acted rudely yesterday, too. Um, do you just want one?”

“Yes.”

“The taste of the meat in this dish is stronger than the one from yesterday, though, and it has a unique texture to it. A number of customers from the south have told me they weren’t fond of that, so would you like to try a sample before buying?”

There had been a remarkable drop-off in customers trying samples lately, so I would have to sacrifice one of the patties meant for selling, but there was really no helping that. And besides, the chance to earn a new customer was worth a lot more than the two red coins I would get from a sale.

However, the young man just looked all the more displeased upon hearing my

words.

“Is that so...? Is the taste of the meat really that strong?”

“Hmm, well, there are customers from the south who are completely fine with it, too. But if I had to pick one, then that myamuu dish is more popular with southerners.”

“What should I do...?” the young man questioned, tilting his head.

I was about to say, “I’m not really sure how to respond to that,” only to gasp “Gyah!” instead.

From behind the young southerner’s stout frame, I could now spy speckled dark brown hair and a beautiful green eye like jade staring my way.



“A-Ah, you’re here too. Um... I’m truly sorry for my rude statement from yesterday,” I stated, taking the towel off my head and giving a thirty degree bow.

I could only spy part of her hair and her left eye from where I stood.

“How do you want me to proceed? It seems you can also confirm the taste first,” the young man stated, turning to look at her.

Instantly, Diel wailed out, “You dummy! Don’t move! He’s gonna see me!”

“Um, I can already see you a bit, so I don’t think there’s much point to hiding any longer...” I gently pointed out, only for the bit of her pale skin showing to turn red.

“Are you mad...?”

“Huh?”

“I hit you twice yesterday, but you’re not mad at me?”

“I mean, I was the one who went and acted rudely first. Not that I particularly approve of violence, though. Still, I’d say I brought that on myself, so I’m definitely not angry.”

Unfortunately I couldn’t quite bring myself to force a smile, but I was at least able to calmly get out that response. And it honestly wasn’t a lie that I wasn’t angry.

“You’re really not mad...?”

“Yup, that’s right.”

“I’m still angry, though...”

“Ah, yeah, I really am sorry about that.”

“Do you still think that I’m a boy...?”

“I don’t! I just had the dumb preconception in my head that there could never be any southern women in Genos. I’m seriously sorry, so could you find it in yourself to forgive me?”

Perhaps because I was behaving so humbly, the girl finally stepped out from

the shadow of the young man.

She really was small and slender, with an adorable face. Looking now, it really was hard to see her as anything but a woman. Seriously, what had my brain been doing, reading her as a cute, girlish boy? The human mind could be seriously baffling at times.

Though with all that said, if she didn't like being mistaken for a boy, she could've dressed more girly. The sleeveless vest and cylindrical pants she wore were the same as the young man accompanying her, and the coloring was chic but also a bit utilitarian.

With both westerners and the people of the forest's edge, women tended to wear flashy, feminine attire, and they also usually showed off quite a bit of skin. As to whether this girl had especially womanly proportions, well, I preferred not to answer, but if she got dressed up in girly attire then she'd surely be cute enough to turn heads.

"That girl is incredibly pretty..." Diel stated with a harsh glare pointed Reina Ruu's way.

In response, the second Ruu daughter gave a bit of a troubled smile and said "Huh?" with a tilt of her head.

"And that one is too, and the girl with the red hair next to her is super cute. Is the forest's edge just full of beauties?"

"W-Well, I can't exactly deny that..."

"I guess it makes sense that someone like me would look like a man when you're always surrounded by such beautiful women..."

"That's not true at all! You've got as cute a face as anyone, don't you?!" I replied without thinking.

Diel's pale face went bright red in response, and Reina Ruu's cute round eyes narrowed and grew just as chilly as my clan head's. I really was shocked to see the latter girl give a look like that, and couldn't help but give a mental sigh.

"Wh-What are you, stupid? Trying to suck up to me with nonsense like that only makes me trust you less, y'know. You really are an inconsiderate guy,

Asuta!”

“Yeah, even I can’t help but hate myself sometimes... Anyway, if you really did come here for my food again in spite of all that, then please go ahead! I’ll make up a sample for you to try out, so—”

“I don’t need to taste it first. But will you really sell your cooking to me...?”

“I can’t see any reason why not. In fact, it’d make me really glad if you bought some.”

Then, with her cheeks still red, Diel broke out in a truly joyful smile.

It may have been that innocent grin that finally cleared away the last bit of reservation I had been feeling. Her words and actions made her a bit tricky to handle, but at the very least, she seemed to be incredibly open when it came to her emotions. To relate her to someone I knew more closely, she may just have been pretty similar to Lala Ruu.

And when a person like that smiled, it really was quite charming. For some reason, it really reminded me of when Pops first shot me a grin.

“Well then, go ahead and sell me one! How many coins is it?”

“Ah, thank you. That will be two red coins.”

“So cheap! Can you really make a profit like that?”

“Yeah, at least as much as other stalls do.”

Since Ai Fa had resumed hunting, we once again had some days when we didn’t need to buy meat from other clans. Those circumstances meant our baseline expenses fluctuated quite a bit, but we most certainly shouldn’t have been any worse off than the other stalls.

Ah, as for today’s meat, we had purchased it from the Ran clan rather than the Ruu. And rather than paying 12 red coins for one giba’s worth, we went with 120. In other words, thanks to the negotiations with Tsvai and Mia Lea Ruu, we had finally revised the cost of meat to something more proper.

Depending on the size of the giba, we would pay anywhere from 100 to 140 red coins. We also determined that we would pay half the price for half of a carcass, too. That was out of consideration for the fact that small clans also

needed to keep meat for themselves too, unlike the Ruu who were able to hunt down a constant amount.

“Well then, one please! Ah, you really don’t want any, Labis?”

“That’s right. I already ate before we left,” the young man replied, pulling out a small cloth bag from near his chest. Then he pulled out a single white coin and placed it down with a clink.

“Thank you. And your change will be eight red coins.”

I was working on preparing the giba burger, and so Reina Ruu dealt with the change. However, even after she held out the coins, Labis offered no reaction.

Seemingly sensing what was going on, Reina Ruu gave a small nod and placed the coins down on the counter. With that, the young man silently grabbed the eight red coins.

So he didn’t want to touch any people of the forest’s edge if he could avoid it, huh?

The people of the forest’s edge had come to Genos from the black forest of Jaguar, and converted from the southern god to the western god when they did so. And so, a portion of southerners avoided them even now.

However, the number of folks from Jaguar who felt that way seemed to be few in number, and they wouldn’t exactly approach these stalls in the first place anyway, so this was an unusual sight for me.

Hmm... They don’t seem to be such bad people overall, but they really are a bit tricky to handle, I thought to myself as I handed the finished giba burger over to Diel.

“Thanks for waiting. And take care so that the tarapa doesn’t spill out, alright?”

“Yup! Thanks!” Diel replied with a bright smile, her mood seemingly having completely recovered. And as she bit into the dish with none of the hesitation she showed yesterday, her eyes narrowed even further with joy. “This is so good! I knew I didn’t need to taste it first! This is just as delicious as that dish from yesterday, Asuta!”

“Thanks, I’m glad to hear it.”

“Still, this meat is pretty darn soft. Is it still giba?”

“That’s right. This dish is made by chopping up the meat first and then balling it up and cooking it.”

“Hmm, how elaborate! I certainly never expected I’d be able to eat proper cooking here in the post town!”

Proper cooking, huh?

That statement definitely stirred up my curiosity.

“Hey, you normally eat in the castle town, don’t you? So, are the dishes they serve there really that much more lavish than what we have in the post town?”

“Hmm? Yeah, that’s right! Even the ingredients they use are on a whole other level! But your cooking’s really tasty... How is it so good when you can afford to sell it for two red coins?” Diel said with a smile, looking down at the cross-section of the giba burger she had bitten into. “This diced up vegetable is tino, isn’t it? And this boiled stuff is tarapa, right? Cheap tarapa’s supposed to be way more sour, but this is sweet and tasty.”

“Huh? Are you saying there’re less sour sorts of tarapa out there? I cooked it along with diced aria in order to counteract that. And the taste there should be coming from the fruit wine and myamuu.”

“Fruit wine, huh? But that’s cheap stuff too, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it is. A container this large just costs one red coin.”

“A single red coin! That’s so cheap it’s almost laughable!”

Her words just sounded so haughty and arrogant. Was that mouth on her just something she was born with? Honestly, I couldn’t help but have conflicted feelings, seeing how she was both praising my cooking skills and insulting my ingredients.

“Still, you really must have quite some skill to make food this delicious with such cheap ingredients. What’s someone like you doing working in the post town?”

“I don’t know what to say, except that I’m a person of the forest’s edge. I’m sure we’d never be allowed to do business in the castle town, right?”

Diel’s eyebrows drooped in response to those words. She really did seem to shift emotions awful quick.

“I’m sorry. I went and insulted the post town again, didn’t I? But it’s not like I hate this place, y’know. It’s the castle town that I find all stuffy and unbearable, which is why I slip out every day. Still, the cheap food from the post town is one thing I just can’t stand...”

“Ah, I wasn’t all that hurt by it.”

“You don’t like how I keep calling the ingredients you use cheap either, right...? Sorry.”

“No, I’m really not upset! And hey, hurry up and eat your food before it gets cold!”

“Right...”

Diel stopped and stared at my face with a concerned look for a bit, but she changed gears before too long and started eating again.

It was then that a tall group clad in leather cloaks approached, and I sighed without thinking. The timing was awkward... though with that said, they more or less showed up at the same time each day. After all, it was my group of regulars, the Silver Vase.

Diel tried to casually move out of the way, but when she saw silver hair peeking out from under one of the hoods, she froze in place.

“Asuta, five please.”

“Thanks for your continued business. Um... the promise from yesterday is still valid, right?” I asked Diel in a bit of a worried tone, only to get back an annoyed, “Yeah, yeah!”

Then, the girl looked angrily up at Shumiral.

“Hey! There’s something I want to say to you!”

The easterner silently looked down on Diel. And his expression remained

utterly devoid of emotion as he did so.

As I stood there wondering if this difference in temperaments was part of what led to their nations becoming enemies, Diel's eyebrows raised as she looked all the more annoyed.

In the next instant, though, she shouted out, "I'm sorry! I hate folks from Sym, but I may have been in the wrong there, insulting you like that in the western kingdom. So I'm sorry, alright!"

When she said that last "sorry," it was in the sort of tone you'd use to shout out, "you damn jerk!"

However, that was probably about as close to a compromise as this girl could get.

With the same look on his face as always, Shumiral gave a small nod.

"I await the day, the war between, Sym and Jagar, comes to a close. I do not, hate Jagar."

"Well I mean, I was born in Jeland, which is in the west of Jagar, so I don't really know much about the war myself, but... Ugh, whatever! Stop making me talk so much! Something rude'll end up slipping out again!" Diel shouted before biting down on the giba burger as if to put a lid over her own mouth. Then, she shot me a glare as if to say, "That was good enough, right?"

Naturally, I didn't have any problems there. In fact, I felt glad to see that she was able to earnestly go ahead and say sorry.

"I saw you, yesterday in the castle town, at the yellow manor. Are you perhaps, part of, an ironsmithing group?" Shumiral calmly asked while waiting for me to finish the giba burgers.

Meanwhile, Diel looked up with an antagonistic glare at Shumiral, who stood around a head taller than her.

"I told you not to make me talk so much! But that's right... We came from Jeland, so naturally that's the field of work we're in."

"Jeland iron, is famed. We lost business, as the client decided, he would buy, blades from there instead."

“Ah, you were the folks from Sym who sold blades to that old guy? That’s a shame! But I mean, Jagar would never lose out to Sym when it comes to metalworking!” Diel said while proudly puffing out her chest, only to turn and shoot me a worried look. “Um, I wasn’t badmouthing them right now...”

“Yeah, yeah, you don’t need to worry that much about it.”

Besides, Shumiral was the one who brought up the subject there. However, I couldn’t imagine him launching into small talk with someone from Jagar just because he felt like it, so it was probably a conversation he felt was important to have.

“We sold blades, each year. But we were told, he doesn’t need them, anymore... Because he, is buying them, from you.”

“Hmm? Ah, apparently my dad and that old guy had some sort of special agreement. I don’t know the details, though, and even if I did I wouldn’t exactly go telling them to a business rival! Wait... you’re an ironware seller?”

“No, I am not. We sell blades, pots, glass, cloth... anything and everything.”

“Huh? Well anyway, I guess you’d better start refocusing your business from here on out. Jagar is famous for its iron, and even there Jeland is a step above! So we won’t lose out to some petty merchants who deal in whatever they can get their hands on!”

Every time Diel made a harsh comment, she shot me a worried look.

Right now, though, she was acting more amusing than aggravating. Besides, it made sense to me for merchants to ruthlessly compete with one another.

“We strive, to make, good blades. However... May I say, one thing?”

“What is it? You sure do talk a lot for someone from Sym, y’know.”

“I enjoy, conversation. I would like, to learn, to better speak, the language, of the west. But the old man, of the yellow manor, broke our agreement. We prepared blades, for no reason, now. I warn you, to take care, as well.”

“Eh? You’re being way too naive, there! If you didn’t have a contract, then you’ve got no right to complain about someone changing business partners. I’m surprised you call yourself a merchant, thinking like that.”

“We did, have a contract. But he still, broke the agreement. He said, if we complained, he would take, our pass into, the castle town. That would prove, problematic, and so, we gave up, on the matter.”

With those words, Diel’s cute expression gave way to a more stern one. Though with that said, it was still more like the expression of a puppy that had its meal interrupted.

“What the...? That old guy’s seriously that crooked? Well, I guess he really does feel more like a greedy merchant on the outskirts of town than a noble... Still, what were you thinking, giving that information to your business rivals?”

“I have, no particular, reason,” Shumiral replied, his eyes narrowing ever so slightly. It was the sort of expression that I had pegged as meaning he was enjoying himself. “It’s just, that you, apologized. You are, unusual for, a citizen of Jagar. And so, I wanted, to talk to you.”

“Hmph! What a weirdo!” Diel retorted, turning away. But then, she went ahead and glanced back over towards Shumiral. “But well, I guess I’ll tell my dad to watch out just to be safe. But I won’t go thanking you until I know if it’s true or not!”

“I do not, need thanks. Let us both, strive to make, the best blades, that we can.”

With that, the back and forth finally came to a close, and Shumiral was able to eat his own giba burger.

Now, I wanted to let Shumiral know as soon as possible that he had permission to visit the Ruu settlement, but that seemed best left till after a certain belligerent young girl left. And so, I decided to just make some small talk for the time being.

“Doing business in the castle town sounds pretty tough in its own way. You do business with nobles, Shumiral?”

“Yes. It was, by chance. That old man, bought many blades. For cutting vegetables, and meat.”

“Ah, so you were talking about cooking knives there, huh?”

In that case, we were talking about knives like the one I had sitting right in front of me, a splendid vegetable knife I had bought from Shumiral for 18 white coins.

“That old guy really is a sucker for tasty food! He’s apparently got links to all sorts of restaurants, and he’s even got cooks living in the manor we’re staying at. He’s super hard to like, but he really does treat his guests well!” Diel chimed in, resolutely butting into the conversation.

“You’re staying at that noble’s manor? That sure is a shock.”

“Yeah, I guess! He was even saying if things go well, he’d order the swords and spears for the soldiers in the castle from us too... Ah, I probably shouldn’t have said that!” the girl stated, hurriedly covering her mouth.

I gave a strained smile and said, “Don’t worry, I won’t go spreading it around. I’ve got no interest in fighting with nobles, after all.”

“Yeah, I mean, that old guy’s got a real lousy personality! And to nobles, money’s more important than the lives of commoners.” Then, Diel’s eyes suddenly started to sparkle. “Ooh, how about if I introduce you to him, Asuta? You’d be set for life if you became a noble’s personal chef!”

“Ah, no, no! This post town fits me way better! And I don’t know if I could make food that would suit a noble’s tastes!”

“Really? I couldn’t see you losing to the cooks from that manor, though...” Diel muttered, puffing her cheeks and looking a bit upset. “Still, it might be best not to get involved with a nasty guy like that. It seems like it’d be a real pain, having him go finding fault with everything. Ugh, but I really wanted to have everyone there eat your cooking. I’m sure your food would surprise those nobles even more than it shocked me. I mean, they’d never think giba meat could be that tasty!”

For me, the castle town was some far off, distant presence. And besides, I had my hands full just trying to figure out how to tackle the post town.

Still, a nasty old noble, huh...?

I got a bit of a bad feeling about that for some reason, and so I decided it best to go ahead and check.

“By the way, what’s the name of that noble anyway? Ah, but you don’t have to answer if that question’s a problem.”

“Hmm? His name? What was it again...? Cyrun or Taran or something...?”

Oh good... I thought to myself, feeling a bit relieved.

There was a certain noble I didn’t want anything to do with, even indirectly. And now that I’d finally gotten closer to this girl, I didn’t want to have to suspect her of being a spy, either.

Well, there had to be plenty of nobles in the Genos castle town, so it was probably pretty unlikely to hit the mark to begin with...

“That’s wrong,” Shumiral suddenly stated. “The old man of, the yellow manor, is called, Count Turan. The Turan domain, is to the north, of Genos. There are many, orchards and, fuwano fields there.”

“Yeah, that was it! Turan! But wait, that’s his title, not his name, isn’t it?”

“Yes. He is the head, of the Turan family, Cyclaeus. One of the three, lords of Genos,” Shumiral calmly stated.

I looked up at the sun approaching its peak high in the sky, and sighed with all my might.

2

“I do not, know much about, Lord Cyclaeus. We always discussed business, with a servant.”

We had finished business for the day, and were currently on our way back to the forest’s edge. Shumiral was riding in the swaying wagon along with the women, explaining as we went.

“I met Lord Cyclaeus, just twice. We did not, talk much. But I thought, he was not, the sort of man, to let your guard, down around... And then, he broke, our agreement.”

“I see. Then he went and pulled the underhanded move of saying he’d take your pass away if you complained.”

“Yes. And so, I do not, think it a shame, to no longer, do business, with him. It was, a poor bond, that I am glad, to sever.”

Well, if their bonds were broken, then that sounded like a good thing to me.

However, the people of the forest’s edge couldn’t exactly cut off relations with Cyclaeus because they didn’t like him. In fact, the meeting with the folks from the castle was tomorrow.

Kamyua Yoshu and Melfried were apparently working on some sort of plot to expose the man’s past crimes, but they still had yet to find decisive evidence to act upon, and it wasn’t like our goals were the same to begin with. If it became clear that Cyclaeus was an enemy of the forest’s edge, then everyone could work together, but right now we were in a grey area where it was just a possibility that he had used the Suun clan for his own purposes.

And even putting all that aside, Cyclaeus was still the representative for the elites of Genos, and had demanded that we hand over the 39 members of the Suun. His assertion was that not just Zuuro Suun and the members of the main house, but also people from the branch houses like Toor Deen and her father should all be judged as criminals.

Well, I guess I’ve just got to wait to hear the results of tomorrow’s discussion at this point. Still, of all things, to have someone with ties to Cyclaeus show up at the stalls...

The girl Diel had introduced herself as the daughter of an iron merchant. And apparently, she was currently learning the trade from her father, the head of the merchant group. That dad of hers had already been quite well off, having made deals in Genos’s castle town for years now, and supposedly the last time he visited was when he entered into an agreement with the influential noble Cyclaeus.

They had arrived here in Genos at night two days back, bringing with them the cooking knives Cyclaeus had ordered from them after abruptly breaking off his contract with Shumiral. And the following morning, Diel had some free time, so she slipped out to head into the post town accompanied by Labis, which is when she came by my stall.

There wasn’t anything particularly fishy about that story she had told me. Our

stalls were to the far north of the post town, and since the castle town was that way too, it made sense for her eyes to naturally fall upon them.

Still, whether our meeting was pure coincidence or not, I ultimately had no choice but to remain polite and keep an appropriate distance. The real issue was if I could maintain that calm and composed nature when facing Diel.

Despite the fact that I had to focus on steering, I still couldn't help but sigh.

"Asuta, you seem down. I am, worried. Is there, some issue, with Lord Cyclaeus?"

"Yeah, well, sorta... The people of the forest's edge definitely have some ties to him, too."

"Ties? Between a noble, of the castle, and the people, of the forest's edge?"

All I could say in response to that was, "Yeah." If I let my emotions show too much, I could end up getting Shumiral wrapped up in this whole mess, which I definitely wanted to avoid.

After a few moments of silence, Shumiral quietly replied, "I see," then held his tongue from that point on.

And as we rode on without saying a word, the Ruu settlement soon came into view.

I parked the wagon by the entrance to the plaza and got down from the driver's seat, then everybody else started getting out of the back. Li Sudra still had shopping to do in the post town so we separated from her there, meaning the only ones in the wagon had been Shumiral, then Reina, Lala, and Sheera Ruu.

There were quite a few women and youths out working away at tasks like drying herbs, tanning pelts, and chopping firewood. And fortunately, everyone had been informed in advance that Shumiral would be visiting, so there wasn't all that much of a commotion.

However, it wasn't as if the gazes falling upon my friend now were all warm and friendly. Not that they felt especially chilly or full of animosity, either, but they all seemed to be questioning what an easterner was doing here at the

forest's edge, and didn't care to hide it. That even went for the youngsters, who would normally be cheering at the arrival of the tolos-drawn wagon.

Curiosity, and even stronger suspicion... Those were eyes full of distrust toward a man who was neither an enemy nor an ally. It was the sort of look I had gotten until Ai Fa had given me attire from the forest's edge to wear.

Just like how the people of the forest's edge were met with suspicion in the post town, the same was true of someone from town coming here. Still, things felt a bit more peaceful in this case, perhaps thanks to the advanced notice. Whereas Kamyua Yoshu, for example, had unfortunately run into annoyed men heading off to hunt, which had led to them suddenly drawing their blades.

The path to mutual understanding between the people of the forest's edge and the townsfolk was going to be a long one... That much was an unshakeable fact.

"Huh? Darmu?" Lala Ruu suddenly questioned.

Sure enough, the young man in question had exited the main Ruu house and was steadily approaching. He was dressed for the hunt, clad in a fur cloak with blades dangling from his hip.

The festival of the hunt had come to a close, and so the people of the Ruu settlement were currently in a period of rest. For half a month they would take a break from hunting in order to give their exhausted bodies time to recover. But in spite of that, Darmu Ruu had on his hunting attire. That may well have been why everyone was shooting him such dubious looks.

"What's going on? Where exactly are you heading with your blades?" Lala Ruu pressed him.

Once he was within three meters of us, Darmu Ruu came to a sudden stop.

His always-glaring eyes glanced over his family and us visitors in turn.

"To the Zaza settlement... The Ruu and Sauti are lending them help to keep watch over Zuuro Suun and the rest for the next several days."

"Huh?! And you got recruited again, Darmu? But you only just got back from the Suun settlement! Couldn't someone from the branch families or the Rutim

or Lea or whoever go instead?!”

“The Rutim and Lea are also offering up one man each. It was decided that I would be the member of the Ruu to go.”

“But why you?! Dad’s pushing way too many of these rough jobs on you, isn’t he?!”

Lala Ruu looked really displeased, while Reina Ruu appeared seriously concerned. And Sheera Ruu seemed more upset than anyone.

Darmu Ruu tilted his head a bit, then stepped closer without making any noise, showing off his skills as a hunter. This time he just looked at his family before saying, “Our old man has nothing to do with it. I volunteered, so stop making such a fuss.”

“You did? But why?! It hasn’t even been three days since you came back for the first time in half a month! And you weren’t home for my birthday celebration, either...”

It seemed Lala Ruu was even more fond of this curt brother of hers than I had thought.

Darmu Ruu was furrowing his brow and looking annoyed, but even so, he gave his little sister a pat on the head.

“It won’t be such a long job this time around. That is, as long as that discussion or whatever goes well tomorrow. At any rate, I’ve got business with the Zaza clan anyway...”

“With the Zaza? But why? You shouldn’t know anyone who lives that far north, right?!”

“You sure do make a fuss about every little thing. It’s just... I want to meet with those blockheaded sons of the main Suun house,” Darmu Ruu stated, and then he glanced over at Sheera Ruu. However, he soon looked away and said, “See you around,” before starting to walk off.

Something about that was bugging me, though, so I shouted out, “Hold on! What sort of business do you have with Diga and Doddo, exactly?”

I was worried in a completely different way than his family.

Diga and Doddo had become prisoners again for the crime of running from the Dom clan. So what exactly did Darmu Ruu stand to gain by meeting with them? I just couldn't read what he was thinking at all, and that left me feeling seriously uneasy.

"That's got nothing to do with you, Asuta of the Fa clan," Darmu Ruu retorted, without even turning around.

That only made me feel more uneasy, and so I was prepared to hand Gilulu's reins over to someone else and chase after him, only for Sheera Ruu to grab my arm before I could. Then, she came in close to my ear and whispered, "Please, let him go. I'm sure this is something he needs to do."

"Sheera Ruu, do you know why he's doing this?" I whispered back, feeling concerned about everyone else's gazes all the while.

However, Sheera Ruu just gave a sad shake of her head.

"I know nothing of Darmu Ruu's suffering. But back on the night of that banquet he said that he was weak... And not just his body, but also his heart. That perhaps it was the same weakness as the men of the Suun, who clung to their clan's size and grew corrupt..."

So, he wanted to meet Diga and Doddo in order to reexamine his own weakness?

I really did find his way of thinking hard to understand.

Though with that said, it wasn't like I had any way of stopping Darmu Ruu from heading to the Zaza clan to carry out the mission he had been charged with. And so, we ended up continuing onwards, feeling somehow unsatisfied with the way that things had played out.

I stopped the wagon in front of the main house and unhooked Gilulu, then tied him to a tree off to the side of the building. Then Reina Ruu opened the door to the main house, only for someone unexpected to come out from inside.

"Ooh, you're finally back! I was seriously getting sick of waiting!"

"D-Dan Rutim?! What in the world are you doing here?"

The Rutim clan head was standing there with a grin, blocking the entrance to

the house. “I heard there was going to be a real unusual guest stopping by today, so I came on over to see! Plus I had to meet up to talk about tomorrow’s discussion, anyway!”

“W-Wasn’t that task supposed to go to Gazraan Rutim? And the custom is for either the clan head or heir to remain home at times like this, isn’t it?”

“I’ll be back home by the time that night rolls around, so that’s no problem at all! And I don’t have any hunting work either, so I’ve been bored!”

Dan Rutim really was like an incarnation of the word “laid-back,” as he paid no heed to my concerns and just kept heartily laughing away.

Then, as he stroked his shiny bald head, he went, “Hmm...” and stared at Shumiral. “So you’re that easterner, eh?! Yup, I haven’t met someone from Sym in some time, but you all are just as dark skinned as always, I see! And your hair’s all white like an old man’s!”

Now he was feeling more audacious and insolent than laid-back.

I could feel a headache coming on, but Shumiral didn’t seem bothered in the least.

“I am an easterner, and the leader of, the Silver Vase, Shumiral Zi Sadumtino. Thank you, for allowing my, visit for today.”

“I’m Dan Rutim, head of the Rutim clan, one of several under the Ruu! That means I’m just a guest here too, so you don’t have to act so stiff and formal around me!”

If he saw himself that way, then didn’t that mean he should be exercising at least a bit of restraint? Well, it didn’t exactly seem like there was much chance of that...

At any rate, Dan Rutim loudly proclaimed, “Come on in!” and with that, we finally made it inside. And we found the clan head Donda Ruu, his wife Mia Lea Ruu, and both Jiza Ruu and Gazraan Rutim waiting for us there.

“Clan Head Donda, I’ve brought along our visitor from the eastern kingdom, Shurimal,” Reina Ruu quietly stated, speaking for the group. Then, she held out her hands. “Visitor Shumiral, as we discussed on our way here, will you entrust

us with your steel?”

“Yes.” Shumiral started by grabbing onto the leather cloak draped over his tall body. Underneath that, he had on cloth attire with a swirling pattern that reminded me of the clothing here at the forest’s edge.

There were plenty of accessories made with metal and stones adorning his neck and arms, and at his hip there was a curved blade with a shape that reminded me of a crescent moon. Shumiral handed that blade to Reina Ruu along with some metal darts and a thin knife or something that looked like a pencil, as well as his cloak, then he bowed to everyone in the room.

He was even taller than Dan Rutim, but he had the sort of slender build often seen among folks from the east. Still, perhaps thanks to the firm musculature on his long limbs and his good posture, he didn’t look weak in the least. As the leader of his merchant group, Shumiral seemed like he had both the strength and stamina needed to endure a long, dangerous journey. In fact, despite the fact that he was faced with the hunters of the Ruu and Rutim, especially strong even among the people of the forest’s edge, he didn’t look even the least bit daunted.

“Come on in, visitor from the east. Please, start by forming bonds with those of us here,” Mia Lea Ruu beckoned with a smile.

With that, both Shumiral and I removed our footwear and stepped into the room, while the women took the blades they had been handed and left them next to the clan head before leaving to go gather firewood.

“I am an easterner, and the leader of, the Silver Vase, Shumiral Zi Sadumtino. Thank you, for allowing my, visit for today,” Shumiral stated while taking a knee, repeating what he had said before.

“The man sitting next to me with that arrogant look on his face is the Ruu clan head, Donda Ruu. On the other side is our eldest son, Jiza Ruu. Then there’s the Rutim clan head who greeted you, Dan Rutim, and his eldest son, Gazraan Rutim. Ah, and I’m the clan head’s wife, Mia Lea Ruu. Thank you for coming all this way for our daughter, Vina Ruu, visitor from the east, Shumiral. And you too, Asuta.”

Both Shumiral and I silently bowed back upon hearing those words.

Mia Lea Ruu was smiling, while Donda Ruu had the same frightening look in his eyes as always, and I couldn't sense what Jiza Ruu was thinking at all. Considering the circumstances, it was incredibly reassuring to have Dan Rutim giving a plump and cheerful grin like the god Ebisu, and Gazraan Rutim with his usual calm, gentle expression.

"So, what we'd like to start by making clear is, why do you care so much about how Vina is doing, visitor Shumiral? I believe you've already heard as much from Reina, but Vina's injuries are nothing serious. If things go well, she should even be able to return to town by the day after tomorrow."

"But from what, I was told, that is not, guaranteed. And in the morning, three days from now, I will be, leaving Genos. I will not, return for, another half, of a year. So if I do not, meet with her, the day after tomorrow, then I will not, see her again, for that long."

"And how would that inconvenience you, exactly? You don't have an especially strong relationship, do you?"

"It would not, be inconvenient. I simply, wish to see her..." Shumiral replied, seated with his knees together and staring straight at Mia Lea Ruu.

And then, while looking like he was really enjoying himself, Dan Rutim let out a hearty chuckle.

"I never thought I'd see somebody from town fall for a woman of the forest's edge! So, you want to take Vina Ruu as your wife then, visitor from the east?"

That was so blunt that I could even feel myself breaking out in a cold sweat in response.

Shumiral narrowed his eyes ever so slightly, as if trying to sort out his own feelings.

"A wife... That would be, difficult. Vina Ruu, and I, have different gods. I am a child, of Sym, while Vina Ruu, is a daughter, of Selva."

"Uh-huh. Then if you worshiped the same god, you'd ask to marry her without any hesitation."

"There is no point, to such, hypotheticals. Vina Ruu is, a mysterious woman.

There is no one, like her, in Sym. Her charm is, surely because, she is a woman, of the forest's edge."

"Hmm... Well, it's rare to find that much of a looker even here at the forest's edge! It's no surprise that even a foreigner like you would be charmed!"

"A looker...?" Shumiral question, tilting his head. "Her charm, is not, from her appearance. I'm sure it comes, from Vina Ruu's heart."

"Oh? I haven't talked all that much with the girl, so I can't say I know about that! Still, that doesn't change the fact that she's pretty, does it?"

"Pretty...? Vina Ruu, is beautiful?"

I sat there in complete and utter shock, but Shumiral had a completely serious look in his eyes.

"For the people, of Sym, beauty comes, from slenderness. And Vina Ruu, is not, thin. People of Sym, would not see her, as beautiful."

"What?! Well, it's true that it'd be hard to call her overly slim with that physique, but she's got pretty much the ideal proportions for a woman, doesn't she?! It's rare to find a woman that sexy, y'know!"

"Hey, stop that, Dan Rutim. You're old friends with the clan head and I, but just how exactly do you expect us to react to you saying such things?" Mia Lea Ruu interrupted.

"Don't you worry! My feelings are all still for my dear, departed wife! I've got no intention of going off and getting married again!" Dan Rutim proclaimed with a roaring laugh.

Mia Lea Ruu sighed. "That wasn't really the issue, though..."

It was then that Jiza Ruu joined the conversation.

"Visitor from the east, why are you so fixated on my younger sister, Vina Ruu? Your ties to her are weak, and you say you aren't charmed by her enough to ask to have her as your wife, so I can't see any reason for such attachment."

"But I am, charmed by her. Vina Ruu is, a mysterious woman. I do not find, her appearance beautiful, and yet, I find her, lovely," Shumiral explained, still not showing even a shred of emotion. "No, perhaps I am also, charmed by, her

appearance. Vina Ruu's eyes, are stunning. Her smile, is beautiful. And her voice, is lovely. But to marry, would prove difficult... Still, I am certainly, charmed by Vina Ruu."

"Even if you are charmed by her, there still isn't any point to men and women forming a bond with no intention of getting married. I don't know how it is in town, but that is a fact here at the forest's edge."

"For once we're in agreement, Jiza Ruu! I feel exactly the same! Well, maybe friendship between a man and a woman can exist even if it's rare, but just what is it that you're seeking from Vina Ruu, visitor?" Dan Rutim questioned, leaning forwards while stroking his beard. "If you don't want to take her as a bride or marry into the forest's edge, then is there really any point to deepening the bond you two share? Do you want to be Vina Ruu's friend? Or are you just trying to satisfy yourself with a single night of passion?"

For the first time in the conversation, Shumiral hesitated. But then, he replied, "I don't know. But I do, wish to meet, with her. I believe it, would be painful, to leave Genos, without seeing her. That is all. I am embarrassed, for the shallowness, of my thinking..."

"Yeah, seems you didn't really think it through, but you sure have some deep feelings there!" Dan Rutim answered with another hearty chuckle. "I'm surprised that someone from town would be moved enough to come here to the forest's edge before even sorting out what he was feeling! It seems there really is no limit to your daughter's charms, Donda Ruu!"

"Stop blathering on, already. You're a guest here too, you know. Show that you know your place, at least a little," Donda Ruu quipped back, speaking up for the first time. His burning blue eyes were glaring right at Shumiral, though. "Man of the east, there's not been a single instance of someone from outside of our brethren forming bonds of blood with one of the people of the forest's edge. That goes not only for easterners, but westerners as well."

"Right."

"And we don't allow anything as foolish as a single night of passion to occur here at the forest's edge. A man and a woman must become married."

"Yes."

“If you understand that much, then you can do as you please,” Donda Ruu stated, his large frame slowly rising. “You have my thanks as the Ruu clan head for coming all the way out here out of concern for my daughter. You came here to see Vina too, didn’t you, Fa clan chef...?”

“Y-Yeah.”

“Hmph... Hey, show them to her room. I’m going to take a nap until the Sauti and Zaza show up,” he uttered, with that command being uttered towards Mia Lea Ruu.

While shooting her husband an incredibly annoyed look, she smiled and said, “Understood, clan head.”

“What, you’re napping? You sure do love to sleep, don’t you?! Who’s gonna keep us entertained in the meantime, though, Donda Ruu?”

“So annoying...” Donda Ruu grumbled back as he disappeared down the hallway off to the right of the room.

As she watched her husband leave, Mia Lea Ruu also rose to her feet.

“Shumiral, our guest, let me show you to our daughter’s room. Jiza, please entertain our guests from the Rutim clan in the meantime.”

With that, we headed in the opposite direction of where Donda Ruu had gone, down the left hallway. From what I could recall, Granny Jiba’s bedroom was also on the right, so this was my first time being down this way. But just like I remembered of that other hallway, this one also continued straight on for ten meters or so, with three doors evenly spaced along the inner wall. Mia Lea Ruu walked up to the nearest of those, then gave a knock on the door.

“Vina, the clan head gave his permission, so I brought our visitor, Shumiral. And Asuta is here, too. May I let them in?”

Silence.

After we stood there for ten seconds or so, Mia Lea Ruu lifted her hand to knock again, only for the door to energetically slide open.

“Hey there, Asuta! I’m glad you and that visitor didn’t get beat to a pulp by our old man!”

Instead of Vina Ruu, it was Ludo Ruu who greeted us. And for some reason, he was holding Jiza Ruu's son Kota Ruu. The infant's innocent little black eyes looked up at me and Shumiral, shooting us a confused look.

"Here, can I hand Kota over to you?"

"Of course. Come play with grandma, Kota," Mia Lea Ruu said with a smile as she took young Kota Ruu into her arms. The infant gave a happy sounding, "Gah!" in response.

"Ah, I remember that white hair of yours that's just like Granny Jiba's. I'm the youngest son of the main Ruu house, Ludo Ruu. Pleased to see you again, visitor."

"I am, Shumiral Zi Sadumtino. I remember you, as well."

"Yeah, I was coming to the post town as a bodyguard for a good long while there. Anyway, apparently my old man trusted your words and decided to let you meet Vina. Just keep in mind that if you break that trust, I'll have to take you down," Ludo Ruu stated, patting his hip as he did so. Hanging there was the replacement knife he had bought after the incident with Tei Suun. "You seem pretty skilled too, but you're no match for me. Still, I've heard rumors that you guys from Sym use poison. So if I see you acting suspiciously, I'll cut you down without hesitation. Anyway, could you promise me you won't get close enough to Vina to touch her?"

"Yes. I will keep, that promise."

"Right, I'll hold you to that. I don't want to stink the house up with blood, after all. Oh, and the same goes if you try to do anything to Asuta, too."

There's no way that'd ever happen, I thought to myself, but I figured it was still essential for him to say so. After all, if my judgment was completely off the mark and Shumiral meant the people of the Ruu clan harm, then that would mean Vina Ruu was being exposed to danger. Honestly, looking at it from the point of view of Donda Ruu and the rest of her family, they were actually putting a good bit of trust in Shumiral.

"Well then, come on in. But remember that this is Vina's room, so it's real girly. Just prepare yourselves, alright?"

With that, Ludo Ruu stepped aside, and we were finally allowed into the room.

I certainly wouldn't call it girly. However, the room was overflowing with the smell of flowers.

Just like with Granny Jiba's bedroom, it looked to be around nine square meters. There was no real furniture aside from a large shelf along one wall. Still, there was a strangely cheerful feel to the space that marked it as a girl's room and made me feel a little uneasy being there.

Beautifully colored cloths hung from the walls of the room. And above them were all sorts of fresh flowers, which must have been creating the fragrant aroma.

Atop the shelf, there were a variety of girlish accessories. They must have been for use alongside her banquet attire. Even from a distance, I could spy sparkling metal and stones. And that iridescent bit of color over there had to be the veil and shawl she wore around her head and waist.

The cloth hanging on the walls wasn't all decorative, as I could also spy swirling patterns, which were probably spare outfits to switch out while others were being washed.

Vina Ruu must have shared this room with her sisters, too. After all, that was quite a few outfits for her to wear all on her own. Even though those outfits were similar to underwear or swimsuits in form, they were the normal attire you saw all around the forest's edge, so there was no reason for such things to make me feel embarrassed... But I still couldn't shake the feeling that I had stepped into a forbidden flower garden.

As for the owner of that forbidden garden, she was lying elegantly at the far end of the room.

Vina Ruu's sensual limbs were spread out atop a number of layered sheets meant to be slept upon.

Her right hand was supporting her head and she was facing our way, with a pose like that of the recumbent Buddha. That was a normal enough pose, but the way that the contours of her body were moving up and down even more

than usual made it feel particularly seductive.

Her eyes looked as drowsy as always, and her mouth wasn't showing any sort of particular expression. As for her injured right ankle, it had a greyish scrap of cloth wrapped around it. Perhaps she had some sort of poultice underneath that, as the flower aroma gave way to a powerful cool and refreshing smell as we approached.

"Sorry for my shabby appearance... I've been seated for so long that my butt has started to hurt..."

"Ah, don't worry about that, Vina Ruu. Resting can be hard work," I said while taking a seat in the middle of the room.

Shumiral sat down next to me, while Ludo Ruu plopped down closer to Vina Ruu so that he could keep an eye on us.

"Vina Ruu, my apologies, for the sudden visit," Shumiral stated with a gentle bow of his head.

Vina Ruu didn't say anything in response.

The look in her eyes seemed somehow annoyed, too. It seemed she really didn't welcome Shumiral's visit after all.

After that, the room remained silent for a while. Both Shumiral and Vina Ruu were staring at one another, but neither was saying a word.

Time crawled along as slow as a snail, until Ludo Ruu was unable to stand it any longer and finally spoke up.

"Hey, did you actually have any sort of business with Vina? The guys from the Zaza and Sauti are going to be coming eventually, so I can't exactly keep hanging out here forever."

"You do not, have time?"

"No, I should still be alright for a bit, but..."

"Thank you, for spending, your precious time, here."

With that, the silence returned.

The next one to speak ended up being Vina Ruu.

“Um... If you don't have any business here, then could I ask you to leave...?”

Sure enough, that was a pretty chilly tone for her.

Shumiral tilted his head in response, looking confused.

“I am carrying out, my business, at the moment.”

“What...? Your business is sitting there quietly and staring at me...?”

“Yes. In the morning, three days from now, I will be, leaving Genos. So before that, I wanted, to burn the sight, of you into, my eyes and mind.”

If he had been more fluent in the language, then that may have come across as him seriously putting on airs. But I knew Shumiral was earnest and reserved, so I could tell that he was trying his hardest to express his feelings.

And yet, Vina Ruu still looked displeased.



“Hmm... But Vina’s able to walk a lot more on her own now, so she should be able to make it back to town by the day after tomorrow. So I’d say you wasted your time coming out here today,” Ludo Ruu stated in place of his silent sister, only for Shumiral to narrow his eyes with a look of satisfaction.

“If I can, see you again, the day, after tomorrow, that would make me, glad. I hope, that your injury, heals soon.”

“I just don’t get you... If you were trying to marry me, then I could just turn you down and that’d be the end of it. But what should I do when you’re like this...?” Vina Ruu muttered, swiping up her chestnut-colored hair with her open left hand. “You don’t want to marry me, and you’re not asking for one night of pleasure... You aren’t even trying to forge bonds of friendship... So why did you come all the way out here...?”

Huh? I thought to myself, and could almost feel myself falling forward as I sat there.

However, there was no shift in Shumiral’s expression. Instead, he just kept his gaze fixed on Vina Ruu as he removed one of the accessories around his right wrist.

“Vina Ruu, would it trouble you, to accept, this gift?”

She didn’t say anything in response.

“These are, protective stones, to ward off, disaster. I pray, that you live, a healthy life, Vina Ruu.”

It was a silver chain with pink stones around the size of a pinky finger’s nail embedded here and there throughout. The weave of the chain reminded me a bit of the blue stone necklace I had given Ai Fa.

“What do you think, Vina...? If you’re accepting it, then I’ll take it from him first,” Ludo Ruu asked while glancing at his silent sister out of the corner of his eye.

With that, Vina Ruu slowly sat up, the same aura hanging about her as Donda Ruu had exuded earlier. Then, once she was seated with her legs out to one side, she quietly asked, “Why...? We’ve hardly had any interaction at all, so how

does it make any sense for me to receive such a gift from you...?”

“Vina Ruu, I simply wish, for you to live, a healthy life. If you were, injured again, after I left, that would, make me sad.”

Once again, she went silent.

“I don’t need, anything in return. I simply pray, for your happiness.”

“Well, if he’s giving it then why not go ahead take it? Even if you decide you don’t need it, you can just throw it away later,” Ludo Ruu chimed in with a yawn, seemingly having grown quite bored with all this.

As she slumped back down a bit, Vina Ruu glared at Shumiral through her long bangs.

“Are you just teasing me...?”

Shumiral blinked a few times.

“Teasing? I do not, understand.”

“Why should you go wishing for my happiness...? I mean, you’re not interested in a fat woman like me, right...?”

I knew it! I thought to myself.

Ludo Ruu, meanwhile, ruffled his blond hair while muttering, “You’re just coming out and saying it...?”

It seemed these two siblings had been eavesdropping on the conversation in the main hall.

“I’m fat anyway, so I’ll just never get married and end up a buff old lady...”

“But you’re the one who’s always rejecting marriage offers, Vina...”

“That’s true... So just leave me alone already...” Vina Ruu grumbled, slumping up against the rear wall.

Seeing that, Ludo Ruu stroked his chin and said, “Hmm... Looks like she’s just about at her limit. Sorry, but how about we call it quits here?”

“Yes,” Shumiral replied while casting his gaze downwards and tightly gripping the gift he had been offering. Then, he rose to his feet, gave Vina Ruu a silent

bow, and turned around.

“Sorry about that. She broke out in a bit of a fever yesterday, and even ignoring that, she’s been trapped in the house for two days now, so Vina’s not been in the best of spirits. Well, she’s kind of delicate to begin with, anyway...” Ludo Ruu stated after we exited the room and he had closed the door. “She’s especially bad with romantic stuff. Thanks to her looks, she’s had tons of men trying to court her since forever. And each time she turns one down she gets super mopey, thinking that the men won’t want anything to do with her anymore,” the boy said with a big grin despite the fact that he was revealing his sister’s unpleasant past. “Still, you’re the first man I’ve ever heard say she wasn’t pretty. Ever since she overheard that, she’s looked about ready to blow, whether from anger or sadness or whatever. So I really do think she’s at her limit for today.”

“Right...”

“You want me to hand that over to Vina?” Ludo Ruu asked, looking down at the accessory Shumiral was still gripping in his right hand.

However, the young man from the east replied, “No,” with a shake of his head. “I will hand it, to Vina Ruu, the day after tomorrow. If I do not, see her then, I will give up.”

“Gotcha. You sure are an interesting guy, Shumiral,” Ludo Ruu said, then gave the man a light jab in the chest. “It sure would be interesting having you marry into the forest’s edge, but I guess that’d be tricky to pull off... But still, if you really are seriously thinking about Vina’s happiness, then I certainly can’t hate you for that. Anyway, see you around.”

3

“Huh? Is it just you around, Mia Lea Ruu?” I questioned, as only she and her grandchild were there when we returned to the main hall.

“Yes, since a lot of guests showed up all at once. It would have been too cramped inside the house, so they’re all outside instead.”

A lot of guests?

But this was the main Ruu house, where 12 family members plus an infant lived. Even if both Gulaf Zaza and Dari Sauti showed up at the same time, that wouldn't exactly put them over capacity.

"Ah, I don't mean the leading clan heads. A big crowd of men I didn't really recognize suddenly showed up. They seemed oddly angry for some reason, but I don't think they're going to get violent or anything. Ah, right, and I saw Ai Fa mixed in with them, too."

"Huh? Ai Fa?"

Now I had even less of a clue as to what was going on.

At any rate, after picking up Shumiral's cloak and blades, we stepped outside together.

What awaited us there was a crowd of around ten or so coarse-looking men of the forest's edge. It was true enough that it would be a tight squeeze fitting them all in the main Ruu house.

"Are you done here...?" questioned Donda Ruu, who had just headed off to his own room not that long ago, shooting us a glare out of the corner of his eye. Standing next to him was the same group from before: Jiza Ruu, Dan Rutim, Gazraan Rutim, as well as Dari Sauti and Gulaf Zaza, who must have shown up at some point. And the visiting heads of the leading clans were each accompanied by one man, making for a group of eight in total.

Facing them were six men, as well as Ai Fa.

When my clan head saw me, she said, "Good work," with a nod. Seeing her calm expression was what finally got me to stop tensing up.

"So that's the easterner who's come to the Ruu settlement as a guest, eh?" Gulaf Zaza grumbled in a low voice.

No matter how big of a crowd they may be in, the giba-headed cloaks worn by the men of the Zaza clan always stood out. And on top of that, their clan head in particular had a physique that was a match for Donda Ruu's.

"The Ruu clan are free to invite anyone they please as a guest, but right now we're sort of busy. So I'd appreciate it if you got out of here."

“Yes. I am leaving. Clan head Donda Ruu, thank you very much, for today,” Shumiral said with a bow to the Ruu clan head after fending off that glare from Gulaf Zaza. Then he turned to swiftly walk off, only for me to suddenly grab his arm.

“Hold on, Shumiral. Um... Would you mind talking to me a bit more?”

Even I didn’t know why I said that, honestly. I just sort of felt like I couldn’t just leave him be right now for some reason.

“I would not mind, talking to you. It would, make me happy, to do so.”

“Hmm, but how should we handle things...?”

After all, despite what I had said, it wasn’t like I could just overlook this whole commotion that Ai Fa was somehow mixed up in.

As I stood there hesitating, Shumiral pointed towards the wagon stopped next to the Ruu house.

“I will wait. There I will, be able to, see you, but not, hear you.”

“Yeah, that’d be a huge help.”

Perhaps that was just the sort of guts I should expect from the leader of a merchant caravan that traveled the world, but at any rate Shumiral walked nonchalantly over towards the wagon without faltering in the least despite the glares from so many men of the forest’s edge focusing on him.

Once he was sufficiently far away, Gulaf Zaza turned back towards the men I was unfamiliar with.

“We well understand your complaint, here. You’re saying you want to have some representatives attend tomorrow’s meeting, right?”

“That’s correct. Do the three leading clans accept that proposal?”

The one to respond to Gulaf Zaza there was the little clan head of the Sudra with his wrinkly face.

Looking more carefully, there were actually a number of familiar faces in the crowd. Standing on the other side of Ai Fa was the Fou clan head, and I was pretty sure that was the head of the Ran clan next to him. So maybe they were

all the heads of small clans...

“We will abide by the decisions of the leading clan heads we chose. We are certainly not making light of your authority. But we don’t just want to follow along obediently while knowing nothing like when the Suun clan was in charge. We wish to see and hear what you do, and work together alongside you,” the Fou clan head stated, following up on what the head of the Sudra had stated. He looked to be about Donda Ruu’s age, and had a tall and lean build.

“Hmm... In other words, you want to have someone there whenever us three leading clan heads meet, not just for tomorrow’s meeting?” Dari Sauti asked, with a far greater presence about him than you would expect from someone so young. And he had no less robust of a build than the other two leading clan heads, too.

Looking at them now, there really was quite a difference between the new leading clan heads and the other men. To start with, the number of giba horns and tusks dangling from their necks was totally incomparable. And even if they were clad in the same attire, the clothing worn by the smaller clan heads was all clearly old and well worn.

The biggest difference, though, was their physiques and the general feel they possessed.

The leading clans and those under them like the Rutim all seemed to be overflowing with overwhelming strength. Meanwhile, those from the smaller clans had a wild intensity about them fitting to hunters of the forest’s edge, but you could really see the tension they felt from their poverty hanging over them.

The smaller clans lived from hand to mouth, and you could definitely tell, from both their physiques and the aura about them.

And yet, even though he was a size smaller than even the rest of that group, the Sudra clan head wasn’t timid in the least as he replied, “That’s right,” to Dari Sauti’s statement. “And once we’ve heard your words, we’ll convey them to our neighboring clans. If those continue to be passed along, from north to south and south to north, then all of the people of the forest’s edge will be able to learn of your thinking even outside of just the one clan head meeting held per year.”

“Don’t you ultimately just mean you’re worried about us growing corrupt like the Suun did?” Gulaf Zaza questioned in a dead serious tone. I found him pretty overwhelming even before he spoke, but when he opened his mouth I felt some indescribable chill run down my spine.

However, the Sudra clan head still didn’t falter as he replied, “That’s not true,” with a shake of his head. “The Ruu, Sauti, and Zaza are all keeping an eye on one another, and I can’t imagine all three clans falling prey to corruption at the same time. However, because of the commotion the other day, I went to the post town alongside the Ruu men to protect Asuta and his group. Thanks to that, I heard quite a number of things.”

“And the clan head of the Sudra then passed that information along to those of us in clans such as the Fou and Ran... Gulaf Zaza, is it true that you got fed up with that man from the castle and said that we should go ahead and leave the Morga forest’s edge?”

Hearing those statements, Gulaf Zaza’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly.

“My words did not go that far. But I do think if we have to discard our pride as human beings to stay here, then we’d have no choice but to give up the lives we have now in this land.”

Those words caused quite a stir to run through the heads of the smaller clans. In particular, the Fou clan head was shooting Gulaf Zaza a serious glare.

“Those are truly shocking words. To say we’d have no choice but to give up this land where we’ve lived for 80 years now... Are the nobles of the Genos castle truly that awful?”

“I’ve only exchanged words with an old man by the name of Cyclaeus. We dedicate our blades in service of the lord of Genos, not that wretched old fiend. But if our blades were being offered to that old man, then I would take mine back without the slightest hesitation,” Gulaf Zaza stated, his eyes burning bright like those of some carnivorous beast. “And so I couldn’t help but think that if I never meet face to face with the lord and just have to keep dealing with that infuriating geezer in his place, then I could certainly see my honor as a hunter getting sullied bit by bit, and perhaps my very soul would someday become corrupted like what happened to Zattsu and Zuuro Suun. If that was the case,

wouldn't it be better to cast aside our role as giba hunters, make a home in some other land, and find something new to take pride in?"

"But still, you seemed to regret your own thoughtless statement even before we could tell you not to get so worked up over someone you had only met once, so I don't believe there's any need to worry about that point."

That comment from Dari Sauti caused the Zaza clan head to click his tongue with a "Tch."

"Furthermore, it's not as if there wasn't a logic to your words, Gulaf Zaza. If the path we seek does not overlap with that of Genos, then we cannot walk it together. It certainly is true that we may have no choice but to abandon the forest of Morga if the lord of Genos's will is perfectly in line with Cyclaeus's. But we cannot make any decision until we know the lord's true intentions."

"Is that Cyclaeus truly so awful of a man? In that case... isn't it even more essential for us to keep in close contact with you leading clan heads? After all, it would be rather difficult to obey an order to abandon the forest of Morga while knowing nothing of what's going on," the Sudra clan head muttered in a gloomy tone. "And that's not the only issue. I also believe it important that we be of one mind on the matter of the business being run by the Fa clan."

It certainly caught me rather off guard to hear my clan suddenly come up like that.

Ai Fa just stood there silently, while the Fou clan head was getting all worked up right next to her in a way that was quite unlike him.

"The opinions of you three leading clan heads are split on that matter, aren't they? The Ruu have lent the Fa their strength, the Sauti have simply watched over the proceedings, and the Zaza have voiced their objections. So in that case, a future where it's decided the Zaza's words are correct and the Fa are forbidden from doing business is certainly possible, is it not?"

"And you're saying you would dissent from that?"

"No. But I believe if the leading clan heads felt that way, I would need to hear why," the Ran clan head chimed in.

"And I believe it would be important for you to properly hear our thoughts,

too,” the Sudra clan head added.

“There are members of six clans standing here now: the Sudra, Fou, Ran, Ratsu, Gaaz, and Beim. All of our clans are located near the Fa house and, aside from the Beim, we all agree with their actions and have learned how to bloodlet and make delicious food from them. But those clans who live far from the Fa have surely had no change in their lifestyles since the clan head meeting up till now.”

“And is that an inconvenience, somehow?” Dari Sauti asked in a perfectly composed tone.

“It is,” the Sudra clan head answered with a nod. “Back at the clan head meeting, it was decided that we would watch over how the Fa clan’s actions played out. That we should determine if ultimately they would prove to be a medicine or a poison for the forest’s edge. But the single clan head meeting held each year simply isn’t enough for such a task. After all, only 20 days or so have passed since the last meeting, and yet our lives have already undergone drastic changes.”

“You mean to say you’re living prosperously now by selling meat to the Fa clan?”

“I certainly wouldn’t go that far. However, it’s true that we’ve gained enough coins by now to take my breath away. To be perfectly honest, at the start I thought to myself that just the money received for the jerky would be plenty. And the Beim clan head still firmly believes it isn’t proper for the people of the forest’s edge to possess such a fortune.”

This was my first time hearing of the Beim clan. However, it made sense that there would be clans aside from those under the Zaza who were skeptical of the Fa clan’s actions, and apparently they were one such example.

“The Fa clan stated they started doing business in order to bring prosperity to the forest’s edge. And so, this is a matter that involves all of our people. Thanks to that, I believe every clan of the forest’s edge should have a chance to properly learn how the Fa clan’s actions are playing out so that they can determine if they are for good or bad, regardless of if they agree or object,” the Sudra clan head stated, steadily taking control of the conversation.

Despite the fact that he was faced with the leading clan heads who were far bigger than him, the little head of the Sudra clan just kept on talking.

“And I also have thought that though we’re all people of the forest’s edge, the Ruu, Zaza, and Sauti were all too prosperous to begin with. The rich cannot truly know the nature of the poor, and the same is true of the opposite. But the Fa clan head can judge fairly, having come from an impoverished house in her youth only to later gain such prosperity through her own strength.”

Naturally, those words caused Ai Fa to look incredibly annoyed. My clan head just had such a modest personality that she couldn’t stand receiving praise from others.

“The nature of the poor, is it? Still, no matter how rich any of our clans may be, it’s certainly not as if we make light of those who are worse off,” Dari Sauti replied with a tilt of his head, staring back into the Sudra clan head’s brightly burning eyes.

“Then let me ask you... Have you ever lost a child to starvation, clan head of the Sauti? Even though if you plucked the fruit right in front of your eyes and fed it to your wife, her withered breasts might produce milk once again? And as you watched your child waste away to nothing, all you could do is curse how powerless you are?”

“No, I haven’t...”

“In that case, can you understand just how much we truly despised the Suun clan? They didn’t hunt giba and simply fooled around with the reward money, and in the end they even laid hands upon the blessings of the forest. Can you wealthy clans ever truly understand what we felt when we decided to forgive them?”

With that, Dari Sauti held his tongue.

Then, the Sudra clan head took a big breath and calmly stated, “And yet, Donda Ruu’s words still felt fair and just to me when he said that the fault fell on all of us for being too weak to prevent the leading clan from falling prey to corruption. The Ruu clan bared their fangs at the Suun each and every time there was a clan head meeting, and yet I wasn’t able to be of any use whatsoever. And so, that is why I supported Donda Ruu’s statement. Since I was

able to hear what he had to say, I found it in myself to forgive the members of the Suun clan. But if I had simply been told the result without hearing the man's thinking, I likely wouldn't have been able to go along with what you three leading clans had decided."

Everyone else stood there in silence, attentively considering his words.

"I truly believe that you leading clan heads will guide us down the proper path forwards from here on out. But as much as possible, I would like to see and hear what you do, and walk alongside you. The Suun have fallen, our new leading clans have been decided, and the Fa have started doing business in the post town. With so many changes occurring all at once, we can't just simply keep on living as we have up till now."

After those final words from the Sudra clan head, silence hung over the scene for a while. The one to eventually break it was Donda Ruu, who had just quietly stood there listening up until now.

"Ultimately, what you're actually asking for right now is to have a representative at the meetings between us leading clan heads that'll decide the future of our people, right?"

"Yes, that's correct. And we'd like to inform the clans around us of what's discussed, like you all do with the clans under you."

"You're not saying you want all seven of you present right now to participate, are you?"

"Of course not. Just two would be plenty. If you'll give your permission, I was thinking it best to go with the Fou and Beim clan heads."

"Hmm... I can't see any particular reason to turn down that request," Donda Ruu replied, looking to the other two leading clan heads beside him. "I only have one point of concern. And that's that I don't want anyone to spend too much time thinking about such things such that they neglect their work as hunters."

"Well, I'd say the same about bloodletting and cooking techniques, too. Just as I said during the clan head meeting, we must never fall behind on our work for the sake of making things more prosperous," Dari Sauti calmly replied, and

Gulaf Zaza just gave a little snort of his nose.

It seemed with that, the plan proposed by the smaller clans had earned the approval of the leading clan heads.



“Those clan heads suddenly showed up at the Fa house earlier today. And then, they requested that I accompany them to go speak with the leading clan heads,” Ai Fa said as she wobbled along with the movements of the wagon. “Apparently they had been planning to say such things for some time now. And when they heard the leading clan heads would be gathering in the Ruu settlement, they firmed up their resolve to go ahead and do it.”

“I see. This was my first time hearing of the Beim clan, but um, are they seriously that firmly opposed to the business we’ve been running?” I went ahead and asked while handling Gilulu’s reins.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of Ai Fa giving a shake of her head from right behind the driver’s seat.

“That’s nothing to worry about. The Sudra clan head said that even though they hold the opposite opinion on the matter, those feelings are likely born from the unease of facing such a large change to their way of life.”

“Speaking of which, are things alright with the Sudra clan head? I realize it’s a bit late to be thinking this now, but it’s true that the price we paid for the jerky the other day may have been a bit much to start with...”

“That’s also nothing to concern yourself over. After all, he himself acknowledged that he received so much payment because only seven clans were able to prepare the jerky. And he also mentioned that he believes more clans should lend the Fa their aid, so as to better spread the wealth.”

Both Mia Lea Ruu and I agreed that we wanted to distribute the wealth as evenly as possible, and we had conveyed that to the heads of clans such as the Sudra. And that proposal was like an extension of such thoughts.

“At any rate, the first step is teaching bloodletting to the other clans, and making sure that wealth is spreading evenly. He said that should be enough that both those in agreement and those in opposition to the Fa clan will be able to

properly assess whether our actions are a medicine or a poison for the forest's edge. And he also mentioned that they intend to convey those thoughts to the three leading clan heads."

"Uh-huh."

"They also thought it important that they hear the thoughts of the leading clan heads, which is how they ultimately decided on that trip to the Ruu settlement."

"Right, I see. That certainly sounds like a fitting way to look at it for men of the forest's edge, but at the same time, it's also so novel that I can't help but find myself fully in agreement."

"I'm sure that's because the Sudra clan head is such a unique man. No doubt the Fou and Ran clan heads ultimately ended up agreeing precisely because he was the one to make the proposal."

The Sudra clan head, huh?

He had an unusually small build for a man of the forest's edge and a heavily wrinkled face. Plus his clan was both poor and small... yet there was a light that burned brightly in the man's eyes.

His wife helped out at the stalls, while he had personally saved me from Tei Suun. Even though I didn't know for certain if Tei Suun had truly desired to take my life in the end, it didn't change the fact that I owed the man a great debt.

"But the representatives for the small clans ended up being the Fou and Beim clan heads instead of him. And I was honestly getting pretty nervous there, thinking you were going to get chosen."

"The Sudra clan head stated that our Fa clan had few members but much work to carry out, so we couldn't possibly pile on top of that such an involved obligation. He also said that he would find it difficult to step away from his clan for similar reasons, as well as that the representatives should be composed of one clan that approves of our actions and one that opposes them. That's how the Fou and Beim were chosen."

"I can certainly see the logic there. The Sudra clan head's a pretty smart guy, huh?"

So ultimately, the Fou and Beim clan heads would be attending tomorrow's meeting. They were currently participating in the final prep session being held at the Ruu house, while the remaining clan heads left to inform their houses of what was going on, while we were heading south.

The people of the forest's edge tended to have nothing to do with clans not related to them by blood, but now they were trying to form new bonds of their own will. On top of that, though it was still primitive, they were now attempting to build a communication network for the settlement at the forest's edge, which was far too vast for the 500 or so people living there.

They themselves would deny it, but I couldn't help but wonder if the cause behind that really was an attempt to change their way of thinking after the leading Suun clan had cut off ties for over a decade and grown corrupt without them noticing.

"So are you satisfied, then? In that case, I think it's about time that you cleared up my concerns," Ai Fa stated, leaning out towards the driver's seat. "Why exactly did you invite that easterner to the Fa house?"

In addition to Ai Fa, Shumiral was also riding along in the wagon. However, my clan head didn't have to try too hard to keep her voice down, as he was seated at the very back as he watched the scenery fly on past.

"Well, all sorts of stuff happened... I wanted to cheer him up a bit after all that, and so I went ahead and invited him to dinner."

With that, Shumiral had narrowed his eyes and looked far happier than I had ever expected.

It seemed the meeting with Vina Ruu ending like it did really had gotten him down. And if Vina Ruu's injuries didn't heal up by the day after tomorrow, that was how things would be left between them for quite some time.

"You don't intend to go so far as to have him sleep overnight, do you?"

"Ah, no. Shumiral said he couldn't exactly go spending the night out without letting his merchant group know, so we should be fine on that point. Oh, but could you take him back to the post town with Gilulu afterwards? I don't think I'm skilled enough yet to steer when it's dark out..."

“Hmph. Well, I suppose it’s at least better than letting a stranger stay at my home. And with this wagon, I won’t have to brush skin with someone who isn’t even a member of my house...” Ai Fa muttered, actually looking less annoyed than I had expected. In all likelihood, she was feeling excited to be driving the wagon.

At any rate, after just 20 minutes of driving, the Fa house came into view. Gilulu really had shortened our travel time quite a bit, but we had spent so much longer at the Ruu house than expected that we still ended up being rather late getting home. Still, even with the extra guest along for dinner, that didn’t seem like it would present any problems.

“We’ve arrived. Shumiral, this is the Fa house.”

It felt a bit too embarrassing to go ahead and say “my home.”

But anyway, Shumiral stepped out of the wagon and looked up at the Fa house, which was easily two sizes or so smaller than the main Ruu house.

“They really are, all in, the southern style, aren’t they?”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“The houses. They are in, the style of, the south.”

He must have meant the Southern Kingdom of Jagar, there. Still, just what exactly made it southern styled? Even in the Genos post town, the buildings seemed to be built in basically the same way, aside from the fact that they also used material other than wood.

But as I had that thought, I suddenly remembered something. The buildings in the post town had been constructed by southerners, which was why Pops’s group from Jagar headed there to handle repair work.

I guess it’s sort of like how most of the buildings in Japan are constructed in a western style? I thought to myself as I carried the pots and ingredients over towards the stove.

Then, as she tied Gilulu to a tree, Ai Fa called out, “Of course they are. Our ancestors moved here to the forest’s edge 80 years back. For a while after that they apparently built the same sort of woven-grass homes they had lived in at

the southern black forest, but with the amount of rain this land gets they soon rotted. And so they invited southerners staying in Genos here to teach them how to build these sturdier homes.”

“I see. How very interesting.”

It really was interesting.

In that case, was that dome-shaped ritual hall from the Suun settlement the original standard building style of the forest’s edge? I really would love to ask Granny Jiba about how things were back then sometime.

“The attire worn by, the people of the forest’s edge, is also in, the southern style. Those fabrics must be, brought into Genos.”

“Hmm? We simply chose these colors so that we wouldn’t catch the attention of the animals out in the forest.”

“Yes. But the Morga forest, is vast, and abundant. There should be many, ingredients to use, for threads, correct? Do the, people of the forest’s edge, not know how, to spin thread?”

“Ah, apparently they did weave their own cloth back at the start, but it was discovered that giba ate berries from the tree they used to make the thread, so we were forbidden from taking its bark. You certainly seem to pay close attention to details, visitor from the east.”

“My apologies. I am deeply interested, in the people of the forest’s edge. Were those unpleasant, questions to ask?”

“Not especially... It’s just that you’re a lot more talkative than I had expected at first.”

“A merchant’s daughter, from the south, said the same thing.”

“A merchant’s daughter...?”

I felt my heart skip a beat there, but I was able to calm myself by remembering that Shumiral hadn’t been there when Diel slugged me.

Still, I needed to open up to Ai Fa about her eventually. If nothing else, it was important to stay on guard, since she was someone with ties to Cyclaeus.

At any rate, Ai Fa didn't seem to have anywhere near as much trouble talking to Shumiral as I had expected from her somewhat weak social skills. But at least to me, that seemed like a rather happy miscalculation.



About 90 minutes later, we started eating dinner in the dimly lit house.

"Sorry for the wait. And I hope it ends up being to your tastes!"

Despite the fact that I was handling it alongside my prep work, I still somehow managed to get dinner ready at the same time as always. I still had about 30% or so of my preparations for tomorrow left, but I just needed to give my all to knocking that out after Shumiral was gone. It wasn't like it was bad enough that it'd eat into my sleep schedule, so it wasn't all that big of a deal.

"The smell, is fantastic."

I had prepared the meat on the outdoor stove, and when I brought in the completed dishes, Shumiral's eyes joyfully narrowed.

However, Ai Fa was shooting me a scowl as she sat there with one knee in the air.

"I had vaguely sensed as much, but you used those red seeds again, didn't you, Asuta...?"

"Yeah, but I didn't make it as overwhelmingly spicy this time, so you should be fine. It shouldn't be any stronger than the giba chitt, from what I can tell."

"How can you say that? It's bright red, isn't it?"

"I'm telling you, it's fine. The tarapa's what's making it look so red."

Plus, even though Ai Fa had said she didn't want any special treatment, I went ahead and held back on the spiciness while preparing her portion.

As I shot my scowling clan head a smile I went ahead and doled out the soup that had been heating on the indoor stove, then I took my own seat.

As for side-dishes, we had the usual baked poitan alongside a giba soup prepared using tau oil. The ingredients in the soup were thigh meat, aria, chatchi, and gigo. The taste was pretty similar to tofu and vegetable chowder,

so I couldn't help but think it'd be a hit at The Great Southern Tree, too.

The main dish, meanwhile, was flame-broiled meat using chitt seeds. What should I call it, though? If I was willing to go a little heavy-handed with the naming, maybe something like giba sauté arrabbiata would work? At any rate, it was one of the dishes I was trying out to find something that could be as good as the giba chitt.

Chitt seeds were an ingredient that possessed both the color and spiciness of red chili peppers. However, they were round in shape and only about the size of a soybean. Around two or three of them were equivalent to a single chili pepper, so that fortunately kept the costs from getting too out of control.

I started out by dicing up those chitt seeds and myamuu, then fried them up in giba fat on low heat. Normally I'd like some other sort of vegetable oil to use in place of olive oil, but I just couldn't find any in the post town. I honestly couldn't help but feel a bit interested in whether or not there was any in the castle town.

Anyway, once the myamuu was heated enough, it started to give off a strong garlicky aroma, at which point I moved it to a medium flame and swiftly added in the giba loin and aria. And once that was good and cooked, I carefully poured in the tarapa sauce, which I prepared in a separate pot. With that, the dish was complete.

It was really starting to seem like I always relied on tarapa in a pinch. After all, I had already used the tarapa sauce in the tarapa stew and giba burgers, making this my third dish to do so. I definitely wanted to start increasing my variety, but this seemed like the best option available when I considered how compatible tomatoes (tarapa) and chili peppers (chitt seeds) were.

If Reina and Sheera Ruu really did take on the prep work, then I'd have to carefully experiment with all sorts of different ingredients. But at any rate, just being able to prepare the sauce beforehand and bring it from home meant I could already cut my cooking time at The Sledgehammer down by quite a bit.

The point to pay careful attention to was managing the flame. It was important to take time and steadily heat the chitt seeds over a flame in order to draw out the appropriate level of spiciness, but you also needed to take care

not to burn the dish. However, as long as you kept an eye on that, it was pretty simple to prepare.

“I was thinking of selling this dish through The Sledgehammer starting next month. And so, I’m really glad I got a chance to feed it to you before you left Genos.”

“I feel, even more glad, than that.”

Ai Fa, meanwhile, frowned as if to say, “What, so am I the only unhappy person here?”

Still, today’s dish at least shouldn’t have been spicy enough to bring her to tears. I had used less chitt on hers, even, so it should have made for a pretty mild taste overall. Honestly, I was getting pretty excited at the thought that this might finally be enough to satisfy her.

“Well then, dig in. It’s best to eat up before it gets cold.”

Ai Fa muttered her chant under her breath, I said, “Thanks for the food,” while Shumiral stated, “I am honored, to receive, this meal.” And so, with our three different rituals out of the way, dinner could finally begin.

I reached out and scooped up a bit of the main dish to start off. However, I immediately tilted my head and went, “Huh?” upon biting into it.

The tomato-esque tarapa sauce was heated up along with diced aria and fruit wine, giving it a wonderful sweet taste. When combined with the spiciness of the chitt and the garlic-like myamuu, it made for a complex flavor that didn’t lose out to the giba chitt in the least.

Additionally, the giba meat wasn’t overpowered despite the presence of that intricate taste. Since I had used the sirloin, a cut known for its soft texture, it had a pleasant chewiness to it. And the still crisp bits of aria added a nice accent to the dish, too.

However, the flavor seemed more docile than I remembered, somehow. It was still definitely spicy, and tasty too. However, it seemed closer to the mild version with less chitt that I had prepared for Ai Fa.

Had I done a bit too much taste-testing and thrown off my tongue a little? As I

wondered if I screwed up in my preparations, I looked over towards Shumiral.

“Um, sorry, but did I make it a bit too weak?”

“No. It is, delicious.”

Shumiral had also chosen to start off with the sauté. And his eyes looked to be happily narrowing, sure enough, so I felt relieved.

With that I glanced over to see how Ai Fa was doing... Only to find her gripping the plate as her shoulders quaked.

“You tried to trick me, Asuta...”

“Hmm? What do you mean? It’s not as spicy as last time, right?” I questioned, but then it clicked: The dish I had been eating wasn’t as spicy as it should have been. “Wait, no way... Did I mix up the dishes?!”

But wait, could I seriously be *that* careless? I mean, I had been really looking forward to seeing whether or not I could please both Shumiral and Ai Fa...

I tilted my head and pondered what was going on, only for Shumiral to do the same.

“Asuta, Ai Fa, the tastes, of your dishes, are different?”

“Yeah. I made Ai Fa’s a bit lighter on the chitt seeds...”

“Ai Fa switched, the plates.”

“Huh?”

“Asuta, when you went, to scoop the soup, you had your back, turned. That was when, Ai Fa switched, the plates.”

“What?! Why would she do something like that?!”

“When you, manned the stove, ash flew out, and fell on, your plate. After removing, the ashes, Ai Fa switched, the plates.”

So some ashes floated over from the stove to my plate, and Ai Fa noticed that and got rid of it, then switched my plate with hers, huh?

What a kind, thoughtful clan head I have! But the gods of this world must be awful cruel, to repay her kindness with such a fate.

“I’m sorry, Ai Fa! This plate’s supposed to be yours! Ow, ow, ow!”

She was seriously pinching my left cheek. And as she did so, tears were steadily welling up in her eyes.

“This happened because you went and played around with the flavors like that! I don’t need such ridiculous concern from you, you fool!”

“But if I went and seasoned it the same for everyone, then you would’ve ended up with the same spiciness regardless, right? Ow, ow, ow!”

“I’m the one with an aching mouth, here!”

It felt like she was going to tear my cheek clear off.

However, just when I had that thought, my benevolent clan head finally let go.

My eyes were now tearing up from the pain too, making me match my beloved benefactor. I really couldn’t help but lament how cruelly absurd this world could be, that we could both end up like that as a result of trying to look out for one another.

As for Ai Fa, she let out a childish “Hmph!” from beside me as she wiped her eyes with the back of her hands. And as I watched over that adorable sight, Shumiral calmly stated, “The two of you, are very blessed. My family, has all, passed away. And so, I think that, the two of you, seem very happy.”

“Huh? You lost your family too, Shumiral?”

“Yes. My mother passed, soon after, I was born. And my father died, three years ago. That was when, I took charge, of the Silver Vase.”

“Ah, so the former head of the group was your dad?” I asked as I took in my share of spiciness, having exchanged plates with Ai Fa.

“My father formed, the Silver Vase. I have worked there, for ten years now. And we gained, permission to do, business in, the castle town, five years ago... That was when, I met, Lord Cyclaeus.”

Ai Fa’s eyes were still watering a bit as she slurped her soup, but upon hearing that, her eyebrows suddenly shot up in surprise.

“Easterner, you’re acquainted with the noble named Cyclaeus from the castle town?”

“Yes. I met him, through a chef, I know in, the castle town. For five years, Cyclaeus bought, many knives, from us.”

At that, Ai Fa shot me a glare, but I explained, “I only just learned that today,” before she could say anything.

Still, why exactly was Shumiral bringing that up again now?

“Lord Cyclaeus, broke our agreement. There are many, bad rumors, about him. I do not know, if they are, true or not, but my friend, the chef, feared him. Lord Cyclaeus, is a very, powerful man.”

“What exactly are you trying to say...?”

“It is dangerous, to oppose, Lord Cyclaeus. I worry for, the people of the forest’s edge.”

Shumiral shouldn’t have heard a single word of that conversation with the leading clan heads from earlier. But even still, I had asked him all sorts of questions on the way back from the post town, so he must have sensed something was seriously amiss.

“At any rate, that all has nothing to do with you, easterner. From what I hear, you call yourself Asuta’s friend, but that’s even more reason that you shouldn’t interfere with this matter,” Ai Fa stated with a small shake of her head, and then she grabbed the plate with the sauté. “On top of that, you’re set to depart from Genos in just a few days, aren’t you? You should focus on your own path forward rather than needlessly worrying about such things.”

“Yes... I know, that is what, I should do,” Shumiral replied, his gaze drifting downwards and causing him to look a bit sad.

Ai Fa just gave a little, “Hmph,” then tossed a bite of the sauté coated in red sauce into her mouth.

Once again, her eyes teared up.

“Huh? Is it still too spicy? But I held back quite a bit when I was making it...”

“It stings even more because my mouth was already hurting to begin with,” Ai

Fa stated, then managed to give me a skillful kick in the knee from where she was seated.

However, she didn't set the plate down, and ate two or three more bites while wiping away the tears.

"Hmm... Maybe it really is tasty, but I just can't tell... I'm sure I'd think it was delicious if you hadn't gone and hurt my mouth to start with, though..."

"Really? That would certainly make me glad to hear!" I replied, naturally breaking out in a smile.

With that, several even stronger kicks rained down upon my knee.

"Asuta, Ai Fa, you seem, so happy," Shumiral said again. "Please treasure, that joy. On my travels, I will pray, for your happiness."

Ai Fa's face went every bit as red as the tarapa sauce, and she shouted out, "Quiet, you!"

From then until Shumiral departed from the Fa house, we spent some nice, pleasant time together steadily chatting away.

Chapter 3: Count Cyclaeus Turan

1

It was now the following day, the 30th of the blue month.

After half a month of waiting, it was finally time for the leading clan heads of the forest's edge to have their second meeting with the noble known as Cyclaeus. However, they wouldn't be settling anything today. No, this was just the beginning.

Donda Ruu and the rest were heading into town with the weight of the forest's edge on their shoulders, in order to correct the distorted relationship between Genos and the forest's edge, and to expose the true face of the man named Cyclaeus, who was still shrouded in mystery.

Had Cyclaeus really used the Suun clan for his own selfish reasons?

Did he really mean it when he said that every last member of the Suun clan should be handed over to the castle?

Just how would Kamyua Yoshu and Melfried make their move?

Would the people of the forest's edge be able to keep living as hunters here in this land?

And would our Fa clan be permitted to continue doing business in the post town?

Even if today wasn't going to bring things to a conclusion, it was still most certainly a turning point.

However, that didn't change what we had to do in the least. We still needed to go to town and prepare food, just like always. We were assigned two hunters as guards just to be safe, but other than that, there was nothing different about today in the least.

And the people about the post town naturally had no idea such a meeting was even being held, so there were no changes whatsoever in my flow of

customers. There were thirty of them lined up before opening, and then when that morning rush was over we took breaks in groups of two, after which we just had to deal with the customers who came by now and again. It was all going exactly the same as always.

“Well, I guess they must be leaving the forest’s edge around now,” Ludo Ruu casually called out from behind the stall. He had been chosen for the guard role once again for his youthful and nonthreatening appearance, so as to worry the townsfolk as little as possible.

The other guard was my clan head, and she stood between the stalls, her eyes nonchalantly observing the road. The Ruu were willing to lend us whoever we needed as they were taking time off at the moment, but Ai Fa had offered herself up for the role.

Anyway, today was likely to end without a need for these bodyguards to do anything. They would only have to act if the relationship with the castle turned out to be so unsalvageable that it was outright broken here and now.

But put another way, the fact that we felt the need to have them just to be safe went to show how little trust we had in the folks from the castle.

“Ah, it’s Ludo Ruu!” a voice enthusiastically exclaimed all of a sudden. It wasn’t long after that that Tara, the daughter of Dora the vegetable seller, came running on up to the stall.

When he saw her, Ludo Ruu walked over from his spot in the rear by the wagon and said, “Hey there. Long time no see, runt. You weren’t at your shop this morning, were you?”

“That’s right! I had to run a little errand for my dad at the inn!”

The little girl with her dark brown hair and eyes wore a bright smile as she talked. She had been a regular since right when we opened the stalls, so by now she didn’t seem scared in the least of any of the people of the forest’s edge who hung around us.

“Ludo Ruu, don’t leave your post. What if someone comes at us from behind?” Ai Fa quietly scolded.

However, the boy just tilted his head and went, “Huh? There’s no need to be

on edge like that, is there? If we needed to be that on guard, then there would be three or four of us here, in the first place...”

“That may be so, but those of us here should still be doing our very best.”

“I’m telling you, it’s fine. That topos and the wagon make a sort of wall anyway, so we’ll know right away if anyone tries to approach from behind.”

“Don’t you dare try to use Gilulu as a shield! Whatever, I’ll take the rear instead...”

As one might guess from that conversation, Ai Fa had been a little high-strung since early in the morning, but Ludo Ruu didn’t exactly see things the same way.

It wasn’t like we were expecting an attack this time around, like we had been with Zattsu and Tei Suun. Plus, the meeting wasn’t scheduled to start till the sun hit its peak, so it wouldn’t make any sense at all for violence to break out now in the morning.

I couldn’t help but be concerned by how Ai Fa was acting, and so I left the stall up to Lala Ruu, who had joined Ludo Ruu and Tara’s chat, then walked over her way.

“What’s going on, Ai Fa? You’ve been acting strange ever since we arrived in town.”

My clan head shot me a glare out of the corner of her eye as she stroked Gilulu’s long neck.

“I’ve been occasionally sensing these strange gazes all morning... Ones full of animosity, like a poisoned needle.”

“Huh? Really? Well, I guess it’s no surprise that there are still people around who would shoot the people of the forest’s edge looks like that...”

“That’s not it. My instinct tells me that they’re all coming from the same person. However, I also haven’t been able to catch sight of them...”

In other words, someone was keeping an eye on us while in hiding, huh? I’d like to think that was just Ai Fa imagining things, but I couldn’t exactly be so optimistic about the situation after seeing the serious look in her eyes.

“Still, I can’t imagine the folks from the castle keeping a watch on us at this

point, so—" I started to say, only to be interrupted by a shriek coming from the stall.

"What's wrong, Lala Ruu?!" I called out while rushing back.

There was a tall figure in front of the stall. However, Tara was just standing in place next to him, and Ludo Ruu wasn't moving either. Plus, Lala Ruu herself had her hands on her hips, but wasn't glaring or anything, so it didn't seem like there was an actual problem here.

"Aw, what a waste! Let me just say, you're the one whose hands slipped, alright? So I won't be able to give you back your coins."

What exactly happened here?

With Ai Fa following along right behind me, I stepped even closer.

"Whoa, what's all this?"

I could immediately tell the reason behind the shriek: There was a completed myamuu giba dumped out atop the iron tray.

The baked poitan had come loose, and the meat, aria, and diced tino were scattered all about. And Lala Ruu shot us an angry glance as she pushed all that over to the edge of the tray with a wooden spatula so that it wouldn't burn.

"As you can see, this customer went and dropped his dish! Geez, it's such a waste!"

With that, I looked over at the customer in question.

He was a skinny fellow over 180 centimeters tall, and he had on a hooded cloak. And from what I could spy of his face from under that hood, he was dark skinned. Yup, this customer was from the east, sure enough.

For a second I thought he was Shumiral, but unfortunately that wasn't the case. After all, soon enough he pulled back his hood and gave an apologetic bow, revealing that his long hair was chestnut-color rather than silver.

"My apologies. I accidentally dropped it. It's true that you definitely aren't at fault."

He was even more fluent than Shumiral.

Overall, his appearance was pretty standard for someone from the east. He had an oval-shaped face, a high nose, and thin lips, plus he was tall and skinny. However, that light colored hair and those reddish-brown eyes seemed pretty uncommon for folks from Sym.

Still, dropping the food back on the tray wasn't the sort of careless slip up that happened often.

At any rate, the man narrowed his eyes a bit sadly, then opened up his cloak so as to reveal his right side. Wrapped around his thin-yet-muscular upper right arm was a bandage, stained a bit with blood.

"My right arm is impaired, and so I tried to, reach out with my left. But I'm not as skilled with, that arm, so I dropped it. My apologies for dirtying your tray."

He still stumbled a bit here and there, but he really was even better at speaking the language of the west than Shumiral. It was definitely a first for me, seeing an easterner that fluent. Plus, maybe it was because he also had long hair of an unusual color, but he seemed to have a similar feel about him to Shumiral. In other words, I had a real favorable first impression of the man.

"Please, don't worry about that. Um, could you hold on for just a moment?"

It wasn't like it had fallen to the ground or anything, so it really would be a shame to let this myamuu giba go to waste. But with that said, the all-important baked poitan had fallen onto the tray and gotten coated in fat and sauce, so I couldn't exactly get it back into its original form. And the diced tino had gotten mushy, too.

Alright, then let's go ahead and make it all mushy.

The first step was scraping as much of the ingredients as I could off of the poitan, then placing them atop the cutting board. Next I chopped them up finely, then arranged them onto the plate meant for samples.

As for the ingredients left atop the tray, I moved them to the center, added half a spoonful of the myamuu and fruit wine sauce, then carefully mixed it around. Once the cabbage-like tino grew a bit soft, that was plenty.

I served that up atop the plate too, then added some finely chopped poitan and gave it a rough stir.

“What do you say? It may not look especially pretty, but the taste shouldn’t be all that different.”

In terms of appearance, well, it looked like the sort of stir-fry you’d see in Chinese cooking. Personally I figured it would be acceptable, but I wasn’t sure what the customer was thinking.

Before long, though, the man broke out in an excited smile. I could feel my heart skip a beat at that, knowing that folks from Sym considered it shameful to openly show emotions.

“Thank you. Now I didn’t waste my coins. You have my sincere, gratitude.”

The customer from the east supported the plate awkwardly with his injured right hand, then took the spoon I handed him and started digging into my improvised myamuu giba bowl.

With that, he only smiled all the wider.

“That was very good. Giba meat is delicious, isn’t it?”

“Th-Thank you.”

Now that I thought about it, this was probably the first time I talked this much with someone from Sym other than Shumiral, since easterners generally weren’t skilled at speaking the language of the west.

“I’ve injured my right arm. And so, I can’t work for, the time being. That makes my money, all the more precious. You really, truly have my gratitude,” the customer stated after swiftly gulping down the dish.

“I’m Sanjura. Could I have your name?”

“Right. I’m Asuta of the Fa clan.”

“Asuta of the Fa clan... I’ll be staying here in Genos until, my injuries are healed. And I plan on stopping by this stall each day, for a snack.”

“Thank you. It makes me very happy to hear that.”

“I’m glad to have learned of, such delicious food, too.”

While Sanjura stood there gently smiling, both Ludo Ruu and Ai Fa kept a steady eye on him.

“Hey, you seem pretty darn skilled, so how did you get an injury like that?” Ludo Ruu asked, seemingly unable to hold back his curiosity.

Sanjura then turned his way, looking a bit confused.

“I’ve been traveling, while riding on a tolos. That tolos ended up tripping on a rock. We fell together, and my arm struck another rock, that was jutting out.”

“Ah, I see. So that’s how someone as skillful as you could get a wound like that.”



Sanjura looked all the more confused upon hearing that.

“I’m just a wanderer, not a swordsman.”

“Hmm? But you’re still pretty strong, aren’t you?”

“Traveling brings with it danger... Both beasts and bandits, can be quite menacing. So I have polished up my skills at least a little, to protect myself,” Sanjura replied with a bit of an awkward, bashful grin. Then, he handed me back the now empty plate. “Thank you so much for everything today. I give my gratitude to our father, the western god Selva, for granting me the chance to meet you, Asuta of the Fa clan.”

“Huh? Sanjura, you’re not an easterner?”

“That’s right. My mother was, but my father grew up here in the western kingdom. And I myself am, a westerner.”

So Sanjura had mixed blood from the east and west, huh?

I couldn’t help but wonder why he was a bit stilted talking in the western tongue in that case, but I thought it would be rude to just ask him about it. At any rate, just being of mixed blood seemed to imply a rather complicated background here in this world.

“Well then, I’ll see you again, tomorrow.”

With that, Sanjura pulled his hood back up, then departed to the south.

Somehow, that had felt like a seriously heartwarming interaction, and left me feeling fully satisfied. However, there was a pair who clearly didn’t think the same, as they were having quite the violent conversation right next to me.

“Hmm, didn’t expect we’d run into someone that skilled here in town... Hey, Ai Fa, do you think that you could beat him?”

“With all things equal, I wouldn’t lose. However, I wouldn’t be able to let my guard down in the slightest.”

Naturally, that was Ludo Ruu and Ai Fa talking.

Upon hearing my clan head’s blunt reply, the boy gave a, “Tch. You say you could still win even against a guy like that? I don’t know, myself... I sort of get

the feeling that he's someone I just couldn't beat..."

"I don't know about that. He seems about equal to your skill level, I'd say."

"What, so you're saying that you're stronger than me, Ai Fa?!"

"Did you actually think that wasn't the case?"

That conversation was just growing more and more fierce. It honestly felt like they'd start shooting one another challenging glares any second now, and so I interjected with, "Hey, hold on. That guy was just an ordinary customer, so could you stop saying stuff like that about him? He may well have been skilled, but he seemed like a gentle, kind person to me."

"Hmph. You really think you can determine if someone's an enemy or an ally from such a short conversation? You are far too trusting of strangers."

"Yeah, Ai Fa's right. If there really were guys like him scattered all throughout town, then just the two of us as bodyguards would never be enough," Ludo Ruu stated, ruffling his blond hair. "But, well, I can tell there aren't many guys on his level from just a bit of walking around. But between him, that Kamyua Yoshu guy, and that grey-eyed noble jerk, it looks like I really can't go treating townsfolk lightly."

Now that it came up, both Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu had been skilled enough to make it into the top eight in that contest of strength held by the Ruu clan. I couldn't say how that would be reflected in a real fight, but still, if the two of them were evaluating him that highly, then Sanjura must have been pretty exceptionally skilled after all.

Still, he didn't really look like the sort of guy to get mixed up in bad stuff...

As that thought ran through my head, after having been excluded from the conversation for some time, Tara suddenly shouted out, "I've got to get back soon, too! Um, one of the myamuu giba, and three giba burgers please!"

"You're gonna eat four of them? That's amazing."

"No! I've got to get them for the guys from the cloth and pot stores, too!" Tara angrily snapped back, and Ludo Ruu snickered in response.

With that, the bright, cheery feel in the air finally returned as Ai Fa gave a

shrug of her shoulders and started heading back towards her position to our rear, only for another customer to arrive. It was Diel with her speckled dark brown hair, and her companion Labis.

When my clan head saw them, she stopped in her tracks.

“W-Welcome! So do you want the dish from this stall for today?”

“Yeah! I decided to alternate each day, so I want this one today!” Diel proclaimed with a smile. And right now, I could seriously sense Ai Fa watching from over my shoulder.

Last night after Shumiral left the Fa house, I actually opened up to my clan head about this girl. I figured it was important she know the fact that Diel was part of a merchant group invited to stay at Cyclaeus’s manor, and besides, since Ai Fa was coming to town as a bodyguard, it certainly made sense to think they may meet like this. And so, I decided to just come clean about everything, before there were any more awkward misunderstandings or anything.

Right now, I was seriously worrying about whether or not that had been a wise decision.

“Hmm... There are a lot of you around today, huh?” Diel questioned, glancing around. Then, her pretty green eyes caught sight of Ai Fa and a hostile blaze started burning bright in them. “That really doesn’t matter, but *why, exactly*, are you glaring at me? Did I do something to you?”

“Not to me personally, but I hear you laid a hand upon a member of my house, woman of the south,” Ai Fa retorted in a low voice, then she stepped out in front of me.

By this point, I was breaking out in a cold sweat.

“Or do you claim that you weren’t the one who hit Asuta? I judged that you were, because young girls from the south are so rare here in the post town.”

“What, you mean how I slugged Asuta? How’s that any of your business?”

“It is, because he is a member of my house.”

From what I could tell by glancing out of the corner of my eye, Ai Fa wasn’t particularly letting her anger show. However, she did look incredibly annoyed,

and the light shining in her eyes didn't seem especially calm.

"Naturally, I must admit that Asuta was also at fault. However, I don't think striking him hard enough to leave marks on him in response was justified. I hope that you'll be more careful of your actions in the future."

"A member of your house...? What does that mean?! Are you saying you two are married?!"

"N-No, that's not it. We're family who live in the same house. Even though we're not related by blood, she's still very important to me."

My reply only caused Diel to look all the more irritated.

"What do you mean, you're not married but you're family? Is this woman keeping you like a pet, Asuta? It's forbidden to keep anyone but northerners as slaves in the western kingdom, isn't it?"

"I-I'm not a slave or a pet or anything like that! Um, how should I explain it...?"

"There's no need for any explanation. At any rate, you should take care to make sure your actions are in line with the law, so that no one goes around talking about you behind your back, southerner."

"Quiet, you. I don't need you grumbling to me about Asuta! I mean, I already apologized to him, and he forgave me! So why exactly are you butting in out of nowhere and complaining?"

"I'm saying that I won't press the matter of your crimes if you better restrain yourself in the future. You really are a dense girl."

Somehow, it felt like they were about to break out in a brawl.

And honestly, this was probably the first time I had ever seen Ai Fa argue with anyone around town. Would I have to throw myself into the line of fire in order to settle things, ultimately?

"Hey, let's all just calm down, first! Diel, if I went and acted rudely towards you, you could still see your family wanting to say something about it even if we had settled things, right? That's where Ai Fa's coming from right now, so can't you try to understand that?"

“Huh? But...”

“And Ai Fa, I’m grateful that you’re worrying about me, but I told you we already made up, didn’t I? Since we’ve both forgiven each other and apologized, everything should be fine now.”

“But...”

They were both now holding their tongues while looking seriously displeased. However, that silence didn’t even last five whole seconds.

“It’s true that I shouldn’t have hit you, but you started it by being so rude! So why are you trying to lecture me now?!”

“Yes, you’re the one who kicked off all that commotion, aren’t you? You need to reflect on your actions more than anyone.” Then, Ai Fa came in close to my ear and whispered, “Besides, how did you ever see this girl as a man...? Her clothing may be masculine, but aside from that she’s quite clearly a frail young woman.” With that, I received several kicks to the leg. “I figured she must have quite a boorish face for you to mistake her for a man... Really, what in the world is wrong with your eyes, Asuta?”

“Hey, that’s a bit much, isn’t it?” I retorted in a whisper, only for Ai Fa to turn away with a “Hmph!” As for Lala Ruu, she was watching things unfold with a grin on her face that reminded me of Kamyua Yoshu.

“S-So, you were ordering one, right? I’ll prepare it right away, so hold on just a moment!” I asked, getting myself back on track as I set about getting the myamuu giba ready.

In the meantime, Ludo Ruu just kept on carefully observing Labis as the man stood there behind Diel. And Labis seemed to be staring back at the boy, too.

Perhaps Labis was on guard against Ludo Ruu and Ai Fa since they had blades as part of their hunting attire. Rather than looking nervous, though, the youngest Ruu son just kept on shooting a threatening gaze the man’s way.

“Ooh, you’re still here, Asuta?!” I heard as a certain familiar construction group approached.

Aldas was standing at the head of the crowd, wearing the same cheerful smile

as always.

“Welcome! You’ve been rather busy lately, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, since we’ll finally be wrapping things up tomorrow. If we have to stretch it out by even a day, it’ll really end up hurting us, so we can’t afford to relax just yet!” Aldas said, his thick eyebrows drooping but his smile remaining fixed on his face. “Well, I wouldn’t mind staying in Genos forever if it meant being able to eat your cooking, Asuta! But I guess we can’t exactly do that with the costs of the inn and tolos stables... Ugh, it really is a shame! Unless an urgent job pops up, we only get to come to Genos once a year!”

“You’re always grumbling about the same old stuff. But you’ve got a wife and kids waiting for you back home, don’t ya?” Pops chimed in with a sullen look on his face, giving Aldas a jab in the stomach. Then, he turned my way. “Asuta, how much jerky do you have left...?”

“Huh? Jerky? Um, this is all I’ve got for today.”

I only prepared around two kilos of jerky for each day.

When I showed Pops the inside of the bag, he muttered, “That won’t be enough... It won’t be enough at all. I’d want ten times this amount by tomorrow.”

“T-Ten times? What are you planning on doing with all that jerky?”

“Eat it on our way back home, of course. There are eight of us, and the journey’ll take half a month, so that’s how much we’re gonna need.” With that, Pops looked me right in the eye. “Can you prepare it in time? If not, we’ll have to buy karon jerky instead.”

“I-I think I can. I’ll have to check after getting back to the forest edge before making any promises, though.”

Still, I had just told the various nearby clans that I didn’t know when the next big job would be coming in, but I’d be counting on them then. And on top of that, the Rutim and Lea should have a surplus of both fresh meat and jerky at the moment, anyway. Plus, with the added mobility Gilulu brought us, it shouldn’t be hard to run all about the settlement and gather up 20 kilos worth of jerky.

“Still, do you really love the taste of giba meat that much, Pops? With jerky it’s true that the salt and herbs are pretty strong, but there’s still a good bit of taste left from the meat itself, too...”

“I’m plenty aware of all that. What, are you trying to nitpick all this business I’m bringing you, here?” Pops grumbled, then gave his hair a ruffle. “I’ve been eating this stuff each and every day, so I’ve gotten used to the taste of giba... So if the price is going to be the same as karon jerky, then I just figured why not order it from you instead.”

“Yeah, if we can’t eat Asuta’s cooking, then at least we can console ourselves by chewing on some giba jerky.”

“You’re the only one around here getting that weepy!” Pops angrily retorted at Aldas, then he ruffled his hair again. “Anyway, just get together whatever you can, alright? We’ll make up for whatever’s lacking with karon... And we may not make it to the shop tomorrow till after the sun’s already hit its peak, so make sure you tell the girls you’ve got working here, too.”

“Ah, you won’t be arriving till later on tomorrow?” In that case, that meant this may be farewell for us. And so, I took my towel off and bowed my head. “Then, um, thank you so much for your continued—”

“Cut it out! It’s not like we’ll never see each other again!” Pops shouted, cutting me off. And then he slammed two red coins down on the stall’s counter. “We come here to Genos at least once a year! Are you planning on going through all that stuffy crap each and every time? And besides, who knows how many dozens or even hundreds of us folks from the south come and go in Genos each and every day, anyway?”

“Yes, but well... Having you all stop by so frequently has been incredibly encouraging for me. You seriously have my sincerest thanks for that.”

Pops looked like he was about to say something, but he soon faced away and held his tongue.

With that, his comrades behind him burst out in hearty laughter.

“Even after the blue month is over, we’ll keep on coming to your stalls! And we’ll eat enough to make up for Pops, don’t you worry!”

“Quiet, you! Or do you want me to send your head flying?!”

“If you do that, then you won’t be able to finish up the job tomorrow. So just let us eat our lunch, already.”

Apparently, a portion of the group had been hired from among the locals. But now that I thought about it, that made sense, seeing how Pops said eight of them would be heading home despite there being over a dozen in total.

In that case, do they have mixed blood or something to be living here in Genos? Or are they just southerners who moved here to make a living?

I had no way of knowing all that. But at any rate, it didn’t change the fact that every last one of them were my precious customers.

“Hmm, so you’re heading back to Nellwea soon?” Diel asked, her face brimming with curiosity as she butted in.

Pops had been silently smoldering with anger up till then, but with that he furrowed his brow and turned her way.

“Oh, the Jeland girl, eh? You’re eating giba meat too now, I see.”

“Yup! I gave it a try, and that’s when I realized it was super tasty! It’s embarrassing, thinking about how I called it tough and smelly and all that...”

“Hmph. I embarrassed myself even worse, you know,” Pops said, turning and shooting me a glare. However, despite his displeased expression, there was a rather gentle look about his green eyes. “Asuta, we’ll be back again next year. I know you’re facing all sorts of troubles, but if you end up closing shop before then, you better expect me to come stomping over to the forest’s edge to complain, alright?”

“Right. I’ll be glad to have you come back and eat my cooking again next year.”

Suddenly, I felt like I was about to start tearing up.

A year from now... Would I really be able to see them again?

There was no way of knowing, but as a lowly human being, I just had to give it my all to make sure it happened.

As we had that conversation, the sun had risen high in the sky, marking that elsewhere in Genos, the meeting between the folks from the castle and the leading clan heads of the forest's edge would soon begin.

2

From what Gazraan Rutim would later tell me, they somehow managed to safely make it through the day's meeting.

In total, there were six participants from the forest's edge: The three leading clan heads, Gazraan Rutim, and the heads of the Fou and Beim. In the end, the men who were to accompany the Sauti and Zaza clan heads let the representatives for the smaller clans take their place.

Our side had announced they would be bringing six people to start with, and the folks from the castle didn't seem to be concerned with anyone but the leading clan heads in the first place. And so, the change didn't cause any issues.

Just like the time prior, the meeting was held at Cyclaeus's private residence. However, it wasn't in the castle town. Instead, it was in a region to the north of those stone walls, with a vast orchard surrounded by houses. That was the land ruled by Cyclaeus, completely different from the south of the castle town where we did business... The territory of Count Turan.

In one corner of that land stood Cyclaeus's manor, which was exceptionally large. Since the man didn't approve of allowing the people of the forest's edge into the castle town, he had used this place for all essential meetings, even back when the Suun clan was still in charge.

It was a splendid and immense structure, constructed more from stone than wood. And it was in that building's reception hall where the group from the forest's edge waited for Cyclaeus, having arrived even earlier than agreed upon.

The time of the meeting had been set for when the sun hit its peak. Kamyua Yoshu and Melfried both showed up shortly before then, all on their own. Perhaps they were accompanied by soldiers waiting outside the manor, but regardless, only the two of them entered the reception hall.

Kamyua Yoshu was wearing his usual cloak, while Melfried had his white

leather uniform. And unlike the people of the forest's edge, who had their weapons taken at the entrance, the pair of them still had their swords.

Time crept on, and eventually the castle's bell announcing the sun had hit its peak could be heard ringing in the distance. On that cue, Cyclaeus at last emerged into the reception hall from further inside, accompanied by nearly 20 guards.

And so, Gazraan Rutim told his tale...



"Hmm... It seems I've kept you all waiting..." Cyclaeus stated as he sat down in a large leather seat.

Meanwhile, we all were left standing in the center of the room. The guards who accompanied Cyclaeus all carried spears even taller than they were, and around half of them lined up along the left, right, and rear walls.



The remaining ten stood on either side of Cyclaeus as the man glanced over towards Melfried.

“This is quite a whim on your part, Lord Melfried... I can’t see how being involved with such a trifling matter would be of any benefit to you...”

It was quite clear that he wasn’t pleased with Melfried’s presence.

“One day, I will have to be the one to rule over Genos. And I believe this matter is certainly not trifling when it comes to the peace and tranquility of this land, Count Cyclaeus Turan,” Melfried replied.

It was my first time meeting with the man, but he certainly seemed to be quite remarkable.

He had removed his helmet since we were indoors, and thanks to that I was also able to see his face. From what I could tell, he was a bit older than me, and his brown hair and perfectly proportioned face gave him a truly noble appearance.

But those grey eyes... Just like Asuta told me, they had a chilling shine like the light of the moon about them.

And I could also tell that he was quite skilled as a fighter. Well, I couldn’t be fully confident, as my observational skills just aren’t equal to those of Ai Fa or Ludo Ruu. However, I could at least say that he had undergone quite a bit of training.

But more important was Cyclaeus. The man sat there smiling away as he listened to Melfried’s words. He seemed the sort to always be wearing a grin. And in all likelihood, that was a way of hiding his true emotions.

“Well, I suppose the first son of Duke Marstein Genos covering his face with filthy rags and disguising himself as one of the townsfolk would be an even greater whim... And did those actions even take precedence over your duty as captain of the ducal guard, Lord Melfried...?”

“That is indeed painfully true, but it certainly isn’t as if I neglected my work. And I am free to spend my spare time as I please, Count Cyclaeus Turan. More importantly, this was meant to be a place for exchanging words with the leading

clan heads of the forest's edge. So perhaps you should focus on carrying out your own work before questioning mine."

Cyclaeus's face twisted into even more of a grin as he turned our way.

He truly was an eerie, unsettling man. No matter how many times I may see him, I cannot shake that impression.

The outfit he wore appeared to be of quite high quality. It was one piece from top to bottom, with only his feet, hands, and neck sticking out from the soft-looking pure-white cloth attire. Honestly, it was difficult to explain, but when adding on the metal and stone accessories he wore on his arms and neck, it reminded me of the sort of showy outfits women wore at banquets.

Speaking of which, he was also small and frail like a woman. However, his head was excessively large and threw his proportions out of balance, so perhaps it was more appropriate to say that he had the physique of a child instead.

His skin had a bluish-black tinge to it, and his eyes were constantly bloodshot, causing him to look terribly unhealthy.

Gulaf Zaza had called him an old man, but his actual age may not have been too advanced. However, he was thin and sickly with an unhealthy pallor about him, which caused him to look extremely aged.

However, despite his ill-colored, wrinkly face, his pale eyes had a piercing glare about them.

I had trouble dealing with those eyes. Actually, to be completely honest, they stirred up an intense hatred in me, though I couldn't say why.

The leading clan head said that he had a greedy look in his eyes just like Zuuro Suun. And I could certainly agree with that, but I didn't think that was all there was to it.

My chest was filled with this strange irritation, as if I was dealing with some sort of beast that couldn't understand words...

At any rate, I couldn't help but feel that the reason we disliked dealing with this Cyclaeus man so much was likely rooted far more in that gaze than even his

oppressive manner of speaking.

“Well then, I’ll take you up on that offer and get this bothersome work dealt with. Leading clan heads of the forest’s edge, have you decided on how you will handle the matter of punishment for the crimes of the Suun clan?”

“Our conclusion remains the same. Only Zuuro Suun deserves further punishment, for being the one to lead his clan astray,” Dari Sauti replied. Since Donda Ruu and Gulaf Zaza were at risk of letting their anger and disgust get the better of them, it was decided that he and I would handle most of the talking for the day.

With that, Cyclaeus’s smile shifted, causing him to look rather displeased.

“I gave you more time than originally agreed upon, and yet you still couldn’t do anything about that stubbornness... It seems there was no point to postponing after all, then.”

“Not true. We spent days thinking over and discussing the matter, and our feelings only strengthened further until we came here today. If you say the conclusion we reached is wrong, then we would like you to grant us a more proper explanation,” Dari Sauti calmly stated.

Cyclaeus just kept on grinning, though.

“As I told you when we last met, my opinion is that crimes must be met with their proper punishment. It’s self-evident that the crimes of the one in charge and those ordered to commit them hold different weight, but that can only be judged properly by the legal officers of Genos castle.”

“That is indeed what you told us the other day. But were we people of the forest’s edge not granted the right to judge our own criminals? Normally, there would be no reason for you people from the castle to complain regardless of how we handled them.”

“That was because your laws of the forest’s edge were even stricter than those of Genos. If you had said you were abiding by them and taking every last one of the criminals’ scalps, then we certainly wouldn’t have any reason to interfere,” Cyclaeus pressed on, ever persistent. “The people of the forest’s edge were judged to be capable of regulating themselves, and were granted the

authority to judge and punish their ilk. However, we cannot overlook those rights being used to grant a lighter punishment than required by the laws of Genos, releasing them from responsibility for their crimes...”

“But why? Judging someone means weighing the severity of their crimes, does it not? That’s precisely what we did for the members of the Suun clan, laying out the proper path forward for each and every one of them.”

“But is it not precisely because your judgment of them was lacking that those criminals were able to escape from your grasp and commit further crimes?” Naturally, he was talking about Zattsu and Tei Suun. “If criminals are not properly punished, then we cannot protect the peace and tranquility of Genos. I would say this incident proved that quite clearly. If you cannot discard this weakness unbecoming of your people and work up the resolve to punish them correctly, then you should hand them over to us before you end up committing yet another such blunder...”

It was at this point that I felt the need to finally interject, as I could see Gulaf Zaza growing more and more furious beside me.

“Please allow me to speak my mind as well. You say we lack the resolve to judge our criminals, but do you mean the resolve to indiscriminately rob them of their very lives? After carefully examining the crimes of the Suun, we determined that only Zattsu and Zuuro Suun were deserving of death, while the others should instead be given a chance to reform.”

“Hmph... Wasn’t it supposed to be an unwritten rule that the laws of the forest’s edge were absolute? What I’m saying is that this uncharacteristic weakness of yours, bending your laws in order to forgive these criminals... I can’t help but have my doubts.”

“Of course it is important to value our laws. But, for example, if someone had their mouth pulled open and were forced to eat the fruits of the forest, would you still say they should be scalped? I most certainly would not.”

Cyclaeus’s grin twisted further as he looked over us in turn.

“I thought as much at our previous meeting, but you’re quicker and more skilled with your tongue than anyone else present, young hunter of the forest’s edge. Wouldn’t the future of the forest’s edge look all the more bright with

someone like you in charge of your people?”

It certainly wasn't surprising at this point to hear Cyclaeus say such things in order to fan the anger of the leading clan heads.

But before Gulaf Zaza could let out an angry shout, I offered a retort.

“I believe you're mistaken, there. I only speak on behalf of the leading clan head, like how you act as proxy for Duke Marstein Genos.”

That was enough to get Cyclaeus to hold his tongue for at least a moment, though not enough to wipe the grin from his face.

“It is absolutely true that it was a failure on our part, allowing Zattsu and Tei Suun to escape. And as a result, the tranquility of the post town was threatened. As you say, if we had carried out the punishment for Zattsu and Zuuro Suun without any hesitation, the incident that followed could have been prevented.” We would never settle things if we kept going in circles with our conversation, and so I kept on talking in an attempt to move things forwards. “But because it did happen, we were able to learn a great many truths. Cyclaeus, what are your thoughts about that incident?”

“What do you mean, ‘that incident’...?”

“Naturally, I'm referring to how Zattsu and Tei Suun attacked a group disguised as a merchant caravan, after which they confessed to doing something similar over ten years in the past.”

The edges of Cyclaeus's lips curled up even further, making for a truly eerie grin.

“What utter foolishness... That's nothing but nonsense uttered by a criminal on the verge of death, wouldn't you agree? We mustn't go and take such words as truth so hastily...”

“Yes, it's true that nothing has been proven yet in regards to that past crime. But, that they attacked that false merchant group, and that a similar incident also occurred ten years ago, these are undeniable facts. Also... have there not been rumors passed around the post town saying that the past incident was caused by a person of the forest's edge?”

“Rumors are ultimately just rumors, not fact...”

“Is that so? Yet, I’ve heard that there was evidence left behind that someone from our forest’s edge was the culprit.”

Once again, Cyclaeus was stunned into silence for a moment.

One of the members of the merchant caravan that was attacked ten years ago had died clutching the necklace of a hunter of the forest’s edge. Apparently, the count had not expected us to have learned of that fact.

Kamyua Yoshu and Melfried had been the ones to bring us that information, but they simply stood there silently and listened to the exchange.

“On top of that, they say the people of the forest’s edge commit countless crimes but are never judged for them. Are you saying those are all mere rumors without so much as a hint of truth?”

“They’re nothing but hearsay... It’s truly unlike you people of the forest’s edge to let yourselves be misled by such things.” With that, Cyclaeus stopped and took a few breaths before continuing on. “I don’t know what those ‘countless crimes’ refer to, but I am of course aware of the attack on that merchant caravan ten years ago. But the villainous fiends behind that awful incident have long since been dealt with, young hunter of the forest’s edge...”

“I see. Is that so?”

Since I had heard about that matter from Kamyua Yoshu in advance, I wasn’t especially surprised.

But as he stared back at me, the light shining in Cyclaeus’s eyes grew even more intense.

“The criminals responsible were the Red Beard bandit group, who operated in the area around Genos. Every last one of them were arrested and had their sentences carried out. There is no room for doubt when it comes to that fact, young hunter...”

“A bandit group, is it? Then why was one of the attacked merchants gripping the necklace of one of our hunters?”

“I know nothing of such trifles... However, there is no shortage of giba horns

and tusks circulating around our western kingdom. After all, you all sell them for coins, do you not?”

Though they’re never used around Genos, apparently the horns and tusks we exchanged were used in accessories sold in a number of towns. In other words, whether through a purchase or theft, it was possible for anyone to have a hunter’s necklace.

“That merchant group was attempting to pass through the forest of Morga and exit onto the eastern highway. And so, perhaps the Red Beard bandits planned to frame the people of the forest’s edge for their crime. It would have been a poor strategy, though, and anyone who was deceived by such a thing should be ashamed of their own foolishness...”

“Hmm... I can’t imagine that would be enough to satisfy the people of the post town, though,” Kamyua Yoshu chimed in, speaking up for the first time. With that, Cyclaeus’s eyes slowly turned and glared his way. “The Red Beards were famed as heroic outlaws who never killed, and instead robbed from the rich and gave to the poor. I was only just starting out as a bodyguard ten years back, but from what I recall, their renown could be heard even in neighboring towns. And I don’t believe most folks back then believed that the Red Beards would murder an entire merchant caravan and then try to foist the blame for the crime on someone else.”

“The term ‘heroic outlaw’ is nothing but nonsense... They were little more than a gaggle of bandits, in the end.”

“That may be the case for you nobles who were targeted, but the townsfolk didn’t feel that way. Looking back on it now, perhaps the fact that the Red Beards they had idolized were executed in place of people of the forest’s edge spurred on even greater feelings of scorn.”

Kamyua Yoshu was wearing the same aloof grin as always. But while Cyclaeus was still smiling too, there was now a clear look of annoyance in his bloodshot eyes.

“You’re Lord Melfried’s follower, aren’t you? You should know your place.”

“I’m simply here today to talk in place of my rather untalkative friend. But if my words aren’t in alignment with Melfried’s opinion on the matter then I’m

sure he'll butt in, so you've got no need to worry."

Cyclaeus's gaze then turned towards Melfried, but the man didn't seem inclined to join in.

"Anyway, back to what I was saying, just as the young hunter Gazraan Rutim stated, there are rumors all throughout the post town that the people of the forest's edge have committed all sorts of crimes. Kidnapping girls from town, pillaging fields, assaulting travelers... But strangely enough, those crimes were always attributed to the Red Beards, and they were then executed for them. And so, at the time, the rumor was that whenever a member of the Red Beards was executed, the people of the forest's edge had committed another crime, which sure did make for an unusual state of affairs."

Cyclaeus remained silent.

"Of course, the trickle of those crimes has pretty much dried up for these past ten years. But it remains a mystery whether that was down to the head of the Red Beards being executed ten years ago, or the former head of the Suun clan, Zattsu Suun, falling ill around the same time."

It was then that Cyclaeus's facial expression finally shifted. He still wore a smile on his face, but to me, that somehow reminded me of a grinning, carrion-eating mundt.

Not that I've even seen a mundt smile, mind you.

"So... What is it exactly that you wish to say, oh swordsman with the appearance of a filthy northerner?"

"As you can tell, I do indeed have mixed blood from the north. But even so, I serve the western god. Anyway, let's put such trivial matters aside. After all, the point is that the people of the forest's edge came under some incredible accusations from the townsfolk: No matter what wrongdoings they committed, their crimes would never be questioned; and those crimes were being paid for with the lives of innocents... Well, the name of the Red Beards has faded over these past ten years, but the rumors remain firmly rooted in place. And just the other day, Zattsu and Tei Suun openly confessed to their crimes."

Cyclaeus still wasn't saying a word.

“In the first place, it simply seems unnatural for the Red Beards to plan an attack right in the middle of the forest of Morga, where giba prowl about. If I were in that position, I would at least want to wait till right after they exited the forest and were heading for the highway. That way, the risk of being attacked by giba would be low, but it would still be possible to pin the blame on the people of the forest’s edge. Doesn’t it seem a lot more natural to think that Zattsu Suun was behind that incident from ten years ago, just as he confessed?”

“There’s no point in gossiping about such matters... After all, both the former Suun clan head and the members of the Red Beards have been dealt with. So even if you raise a fuss now, there should be no proof left to be found,” Cyclaeus replied, slowly moistening his pale lips with his tongue. “But what need is there for proof, anyway? It wouldn’t change the fact that they were all criminals regardless. The Red Beards were unscrupulous bandits who attacked nobles and wealthy merchants, while the former Suun clan head not only pillaged the blessing of Morga, but even went so far as to set fire to houses. Their crimes have all been judged, and the criminals are gone from this world. So everything has been settled, wouldn’t you say?”

“Oh it has, has it? Hmm... In that case, what about the other crimes committed before and after the attack on that merchant caravan?” Kamyua Yoshu asked with a grin. That smile had a beastly feel to it too, in its own way. “These are rather old tales by now, but I presume you haven’t forgotten, right? About the delegates from Banarm castle, which had deep ties to Genos, being wiped out, or how the former head of the militia was murdered? It was determined that the Red Beards were behind both of those incidents, right?”

Cyclaeus remained silent.

“That means the rumors around the town say they were committed by the people of the forest’s edge.”

Still no response.

“However, it just doesn’t make sense to me either way. If the Red Beards were behind them, then why did they suddenly discard their rule not to kill? But if they were Zattsu Suun’s doing, then what reason could he possibly have for attacking the head of the militia? Putting aside any delegates or merchants,

there's no way someone like that would be strolling around with a load of coins or treasure."

"Then it must have been the Red Beards. It's the militia's duty to deal with bandits, so it would be no surprise at all for their captain to have earned a great deal of ire from them..."

"Ah, but it wasn't until after the former captain's death and the assignment of a new man to the post that the Red Beards really started getting punished for all those crimes. And I'm sure I don't need to tell you that the post was given to your younger brother, Captain Ciluel, do I, Lord Cyclaeus?"

Again, silence.

"Thanks to Captain Ciluel's efforts, the Red Beards were entirely wiped out. All that was left behind were Zattsu Suun and his ilk who foisted their crimes on the Red Beards, and a distrust for the people of the forest's edge fostered among the townsfolk."

"I've never heard anything so ridiculous in my life..."

"Maybe that's how it seems in the castle town. But for the post town, what I've said may as well be cold, hard fact. Even now that the name of the Red Beards has faded, the hatred and fear felt towards the people of the forest's edge has only grown stronger," Kamyua Yoshu stated, then gave a shrug of his shoulders. "Of course, there seems to have been quite a shift after Zattsu and Tei Suun admitted to the crime from ten years back, just like we discussed before... However, it's certainly mysterious. You say the Red Beards tried to frame the people of the forest's edge for their crimes, but it seems very likely that Zattsu Suun was the one doing it to them. Why is it, exactly, that Lord Ciluel declared it was all the doing of the Red Beards? Was some red hair or something found at the scene?"

"You would have to ask such questions of Ciluel directly..."

"Melfried did just that. However, sure enough, there wasn't any evidence conclusive enough to satisfy my friend here."

With that, the room fell silent.

Before long though, Cyclaeus started sluggishly talking again, the thin smile

still clinging to his lips.

“I know nothing of all that... But regardless, all of the criminals have been dealt with. Whether the true culprits were the former Suun clan head or those bandits, what does it matter to us?”

“Now, that’s the question here. If all the criminals really have been judged, then sure, there’s no point in dragging the matter back up. But if there were a mastermind behind it all who still goes unpunished even now, then that wouldn’t be something we could simply overlook, wouldn’t you say?” There wasn’t even the slightest shift in Kamyua Yoshu’s smile, and Melfried still remained utterly expressionless. “To begin with, as a man of the forest’s edge, Zattsu Suun should have had virtually no knowledge of the outside world. So the idea of him attacking the Banarm delegates or the head of the militia outside of Genos territory sounds incredibly unnatural.”

“As I said, that must have been the work of the bandits, so...”

“The Red Beards suddenly gave up their convictions to never take a life, or Zattsu Suun had an outside collaborator... Which of those sounds more likely to you?” Kamyua Yoshu chimed in, gently interrupting Cyclaeus. “On top of that, a collaborator would have been essential for converting any treasure stolen from the merchants or delegates into coins. Perhaps someone tempted Zattsu Suun with those coins, with the primary objective being to wipe out the Banarm delegates. Was there someone in the castle town of Genos who would be disadvantaged by trade with Banarm advancing further, I wonder...?”

Cyclaeus offered no answer.

“And blaming the crime on the Red Beards would make it possible to get rid of those bandits, who had been a thorn in the side for the nobles.”

“I can’t call that anything but a reckless, foolish delusion on your part...”

“Oh, really? But I’ve come this far without my friend here interrupting even once. Well, such deductions are what led us to putting on the grand show of dressing up as a merchant caravan to begin with. We didn’t quite manage to reveal the mastermind, but I would say we did a rather fine job of establishing that incident ten years back as Zattsu Suun’s doing.”

As Kamyua Yoshu smiled away, Melfried just stood quietly by his side, his gaze fixed on Cyclaeus.

The room went silent once again. And it felt like a very uneasy silence, at that.

Eventually, though, Cyclaeus uttered in a strangely hoarse voice, “It’s... It’s as if you’re trying to slander me by claiming I’m this mastermind you seek...”

Kamyua Yoshu offered no response.

Cyclaeus’s eyes, meanwhile, were shining like a mundt prowling in the dark.

“Banarm is known for producing high-quality mamaria and fuwano... If trade with that town were to advance further, then my Turan house’s orchard would suffer a significant loss in profits...”

Kamyua Yoshu still remained silent.

“And my younger brother Ciluel is head of the militia, while I myself am in charge of mediating with the people of the forest’s edge. If a mastermind behind these incidents that you mentioned truly exists, then would anyone but me fit that part?”

“That is indeed the most likely possibility,” Melfried responded in a chilly tone. With that, Cyclaeus’s gaze slowly drifted his way.

“This is certainly a surprise... Lord Melfried, are you truly intending to slander me so? Me, the head of the Turan house?”

“I offer no slander. I simply stated that the possibility seems strong. But of course, I cannot go so far as to accuse you of any crime without proof.”

Melfried’s inhumanly emotionless grey eyes shot Cyclaeus a calm yet threatening glare.

I felt like I was watching a massive madarama snake stare down a mundt.

“Of course, as long as there is evidence, a crime is a crime. That’s true whether the culprit is a noble or a commoner, and I will cast judgment on them in accordance with the laws of Genos regardless.”

“As long as there is evidence, you say... How splendid. A wise saying from our captain of the ducal guard, the watchman for our laws...”

In all likelihood, the tension had drained just a bit from Cyclaeus at this point. It was as if the mundt had determined the madarama was full, and was preparing to flee back into the thicket.

This was ultimately as far as Melfried and Kamyua Yoshu's investigation would make it for the day.

That just left our negotiations with Cyclaeus. I shared a glance with Dari Sauti, wondering who should be the one to speak up.

Before we could decide, though, Donda Ruu moved just a bit as if to clear away the unease hanging about the room, then calmly stated, "Are these the laws of Genos you speak of, as representative for the lord of this land?" Hearing that, Cyclaeus slowly, steadily turned to face him. "That all was a bit much for me to follow. However, I definitely couldn't sense any logic behind your words."

"That's certainly regrettable... So, you're foolish enough to be moved by nonsense utterly lacking in evidence to back it up, leading clan head of the forest's edge...?"

"Then do you claim to have evidence that the incident from ten years ago was the work of those bandits? A necklace from one of our hunters was left there, and Zattsu and Tei Suun even admitted to their crimes. So what's your basis for still insisting it was done by the bandits?"

"It wasn't I, but rather the captain of the militia who decided it was the work of the bandits..."

"And that captain is your younger brother, related to you by blood, isn't he? Then go ahead and summon him here."

With that, tension once again filled the air throughout the room. It seemed clear that the spear-wielding soldiers were starting to lose their composure.

That likely came down to the incredible presence that Donda Ruu was asserting. After all, though his voice remained calm, he was now grinning away. And that was the sort of smile one wore when faced with a formidable opponent.

We hadn't moved so much as a single step, and yet the soldiers looked ready to thrust out with their spears at any moment.

“Zattsu Suun was suspected of crimes even back at the forest’s edge. Our Ruu clan had been polishing our fangs and preparing to strike at them for 20 years. However, it wasn’t as if they were openly committing any wrongdoing, which is why we were left grinding our teeth in frustration for so long.”

“Oh, is that so...?”

“However, you all had gotten a hold of evidence, but did nothing to carry out judgment against the Suun. On that point at least, I wouldn’t say the laws of Genos are any better than those of our forest’s edge.”

There was no shift in Cyclaeus’s expression.

He was as small as a child and looked weakened from serious illness, yet he still had the nerve needed to not falter when faced with Donda Ruu. Perhaps that was because he had met with Zattsu Suun countless times before the man fell ill, and was thus used to the intensity of such hunters of the forest’s edge.

However, I could also see a cold sweat creeping onto his sickly-looking, grinning face.

“This is a small matter compared to all that, but I’ve heard those fools from the main Suun house drew blades, destroyed stalls they disliked, and committed other crimes of that kind without ever being judged for them. And even when their crimes were called into question, someone from the castle would appear and everything would be settled with coins. Is there some sort of reason you were unable to judge the Suun clan for their crimes, perhaps?”

“That is also a matter that has nothing to do with me. The militia is tasked with keeping order in the post town.”

“Like I said, go ahead and summon that brother of yours here. No, wait...” Donda Ruu stated, his smile growing even more intense. “Call for the lord of Genos instead. Or perhaps should we all just head to the castle?”

Cyclaeus then placed his arm upon his seat’s armrest and leaned his body to the right. It gave the impression that he was earnestly searching his thoughts for what to say.

“Leading clan head of the forest’s edge... Duke Marstein Genos granted me full discretion in handling negotiations with your people. It is disrespectful in

the extreme to tell me to call for the lord of land like that, wouldn't you say...?"

"We people of the forest's edge offer our blades in service to the lord of Genos, not to you. If our words aren't getting through to you, then what option is left to us but to demand to speak to him directly?" Donda Ruu retorted, his voice rumbling like a tremor in the earth. At last, his smile was now fully that of a hunter. "Thanks to the lack of evidence, we ended up allowing the Suun clan to do as they pleased. And as a result, a great many people suffered. Not just from the forest's edge, but from the post town, too... But we have no intention of repeating that same mistake."

"In other words... You are stating that you cannot trust me, then?" With that, Cyclaeus's smile became more of a smirk. "Well, if I were to say I find it difficult to trust you as well and would like you to choose a different representative, would you understand at least a little of how I feel hearing such things?"

"What?" Donda Ruu questioned, the fire in his eyes now burning even brighter.

The soldiers started to brandish their spears, but Cyclaeus gave them the order to halt.

"Of course, I would never state something like that, which I do not truly feel. However, it isn't as if I trust all of you from the depths of my heart... I can't help but have my doubts as to whether you heads of the Ruu, Zaza, and Sauti clans are truly qualified to lead your people..."



As I gestured to an infuriated Gulaf Zaza to calm himself, Donda Ruu questioned, “What do you mean by that?”

“I’m saying that I have concerns, clan heads... You not only fail to judge the criminals of the Suun clan, but even allowed Zattsu Suun to escape on top of that... And if Zuuro Suun slips through your grasp too, then no one’s blood will be shed. Is that what you are plotting?”

“That’s ridiculous! Are you trying to say we let Zattsu Suun escape on purpose?!” Gulaf Zaza angrily bellowed, no longer able to restrain himself.

With that, Cyclaeus broke out in a triumphant grin.

“I certainly don’t wish to doubt your words. However... you are showing weakness unbefitting of your people and offering forgiveness to criminals, and you even shamefully let Zattsu Suun get away. That is all very far removed from my image of the people of the forest’s edge. And that’s not all, as you’re even allowing yourselves to be deceived by thoughtless remarks, and have gone so far as to slander me...”

“So that is your response, as representative for the lord of Genos?” Donda Ruu quietly asked while holding back the raging Gulaf Zaza with one raised arm. “It seems like neither side here can trust the other in the least, so how about we bring these talks to a close?”

I honestly felt rather flustered upon hearing that, as it sounded to me as if Donda Ruu was trying to say that we would have no choice but to go meet the lord and feel out his true intentions, even if it meant taking up our blades to do so.

Cyclaeus seemed like he may have been thinking similarly, too.

But at any rate, the man was silent for a few moments, then in a deadly serious tone stated, “It’s far too rash to jump to such a conclusion... The number of times we’ve met could be counted on a single hand... I believe it takes more time than that to build up an appropriate level of trust.”

“Hmph. Then what are you proposing? Wait for another day and go into the same old back and forth all over again?”

“Time to think is important, but there’s no meaning to simply having the same exchange... But let me make a concession, as proof of the trust we should share.” Cyclaeus stated. “I will trust your decision and overlook the crimes the members of the Suun branch houses were forced to commit by their clan heads. But the six members of the main house, who stood by the clan head’s side, are to be handed over as criminals. This compromise should serve to demonstrate the trust I hold in you all...”

3

“We continued talking for a while after that, but it was nothing worth sharing,” Gazraan Rutim stated, bringing a close to his finely detailed report.

I had been listening carefully while preparing for tomorrow, and once it was finally over I let out the sigh I had been holding back.

“Seriously, good work. Your memory and ability to recreate a scene sure are something, Gazraan Rutim.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that. But I believe I got across what was necessary.”

“Yeah, you did more than enough. Just digesting all that is gonna take some time.”

I was the one who begged him to tell me what was discussed and how it ended, but I hadn’t expected to get that level of detail.

Currently, we weren’t in the Fa house but rather the main Ruu house’s kitchen.

Ai Fa stood by my side as she listened to the report, while Reina and Sheera Ruu were further in the back of the room, diligently studying how to make burgers. After all, I had agreed to start teaching them how to prepare giba burgers starting today.

“I got the short version from Kamyua, but this is the first I’ve heard of these Red Beards.”

“Right. I had only been told that there was a group of bandits, myself. Perhaps he didn’t mention their name because the matter didn’t have much to do with

us.”

“I wonder... I haven’t heard the townsfolk even mention them either, but that just bothers me even more.”

Even if they were heroic outlaws lauded by the common folk, it was no surprise that their name would have faded away over the course of ten years. But since Kamyua Yoshu had been so persistent about bringing them up, they seemed like they might just be some sort of key to this whole ordeal.

And it was my first time hearing about the head of the militia, or about these delegates from Banarm.

The former militia captain was probably Cyclaeus’s political opponent that Kamyua Yoshu had mentioned, but at least from what I just heard, the delegates seemed like they were more of a problem for him on the business end of things.

“Hmm... Well, it’s a good thing that the members of the branch families were pardoned so quickly, but he sure did throw Zattsu Suun’s escape back in your faces hard.”

“Yes. We truly had no excuses for that mistake in particular. Even in his fury, Gulaf Zaza had no retorts to offer on that point.”

I couldn’t help but find those circumstances frustrating.

Cyclaeus handed down those conditions claiming them as a show of trust, whereas our side had opened up and laid out what we thought was the best path forward, with a frankness very fitting for the people of the forest’s edge.

He probably didn’t care in the least about the members of the branch houses from the very start. But...

I had guessed to some extent that with the negotiation skills he’d need to have to be put in his position, Cyclaeus would start out by making overly extreme demands. My thinking was that he was trying to assert his dominance over the new leading clan heads.

However, the circumstances had greatly shifted over these past few days.

At first we had assumed Cyclaeus had just been overlooking the Suun clan’s

crimes so as to not displease them, but now he was suspected of being the mastermind behind everything. If he really was that cruel and crafty of a man, and had incited Zattsu Suun to commit those acts... Just what sort of goal was he aiming for from this incident?

At the very least, I'd imagine he'd like to silence Zuuro Suun.

Tei Suun had confessed that other than him, Zuuro Suun was the only one who had known of Zattsu Suun's ambitions. But as a gutless, lazy man, he did nothing to carry on his father's will.

Even without that confession, though, it would have been obvious that as clan head, there was a high chance that Zuuro Suun had an understanding of Zattsu Suun's vile deeds. And in that case, there was a non-zero chance that he had a grasp on the relationship between Cyclaeus and his father. That wasn't something Cyclaeus could simply ignore.

But in that case, he should have been able to simply accept the opinion of the leading clan heads and order that only Zuuro Suun needed to be handed over to the castle as a criminal. Melfried's intervention must have lit a fire under Cyclaeus's feet, so it was hard to imagine him deciding it wise to pointlessly stretch out negotiations at the moment.

But then why was he still insisting that we hand over every last member of the main house...? Was he concerned that his secrets had leaked to them, too?

If so, then this is seriously no joke. I mean, we can't exactly go handing Yamiru Lea and Mida and everyone else over to a shady guy like that at this point.

By the point that thought was running through my head, I had finally finished cutting up the meat. And so, I placed my knife down on the cutting board and turned to face Gazraan Rutim.

"So, it was decided that the next meeting would take place half a month from now?"

"That's right. He said we should decide our path forward by the 15th of the white month."

Tomorrow was the 31st and final day of the blue month, so it would actually be just a bit over half a month. That really was a rather relaxed timeframe.

“Why did he choose such a far off date, though? It gives our leading clan heads plenty of time to think, and Kamyua and Melfried a chance to do a bit more investigating, but what benefit does Cyclaeus get out of that?”

“I don’t know. But I don’t believe he’s the sort of man to ever make a proposal that wouldn’t be to his advantage.”

“Hmm... You really seem to completely and utterly despise Cyclaeus, huh, Gazraan Rutim?” I went ahead and pointed out, and the young man gave me a deadly serious nod in response.

“I’m aware that I’m likely letting my personal feelings on the matter influence my opinion. But still, even if it weren’t for the twisted connection we share, I could never in the course of my life come to call that man friend.”

Was Cyclaeus someone who made others that uneasy even when he wasn’t openly showing any ill will? I had never met the man, so I only had a vague picture of him at best.

However, I could certainly understand why Kamyua Yoshu had said that it wouldn’t be possible to cast judgment upon Cyclaeus at present. After all, no matter how suspicious he might seem, there wasn’t any proper evidence against him.

If we were just discussing possibilities, there was still a chance that Cyclaeus’s younger brother, the captain of the militia, had secretly contacted Zattsu Suun and done all the planning. Or maybe Zattsu Suun had concocted a way to convert his plunder into coins on his own without the help of anyone from the castle.

There was even a chance that Zattsu and Tei Suun had been lying through their teeth, and everything had really been the doing of those bandits.

Without proof, you could come up with pretty much any explanation imaginable.

“Hmm... And you won’t exactly be able to move forward with negotiations or anything until you clear up whether or not he’s just a creep, or if he actually did use Zattsu Suun to do those terrible things.”

“Yes. Kamyua Yoshu stated that he had to use this time we’ve been given to

somehow get a hold of proof. And that he wanted us people of the forest's edge to lend our aid in working towards that goal, too."

Kamyua Yoshu, huh?

Around now, that wanderer with his aloof grin was having a private meeting with the leading clan heads at the main Ruu house.

With all this intrigue going on, exactly what sort of aid could the people of the forest's edge provide him? I had no idea, but the thought was making me feel seriously uneasy.

Ai Fa had been silent for a while now, so I went to turn her way, wondering what her opinion was. Before I could, though, Reina Ruu approached with a freshly-cooked burger atop a wooden plate.

"Asuta, we tried making it as you instructed. Would you mind checking how it turned out?"

A well-cooked 180 gram patty, the same size used in the giba burgers served at the stall, sat atop the plate. I certainly didn't have any complaints as to its color or plumpness. And even though it was a plain patty without sauce or anything on it, it still looked seriously tasty.

I made sure I was wearing a serious look on my face, then said, "Well then, thank you for this meal," and picked up a spoon. I scooped up a piece of the patty, and the transparent meat juices started overflowing atop the plate.

The inside had been properly cooked through, too.

And when I tossed the chunk of meat into my mouth and chewed, a taste that in no way betrayed my expectations filled my mouth.

"Yup, this is perfect. You used the right amount of diced aria, and you got the ideal texture for the meat, too. Man, it's been a while since I just had a plain patty, but giba meat sure is delicious..."

All they had added to the patty was the diced aria and a tiny bit of rock salt and pico leaves, but it was still incredibly tasty. I ended up breaking out in a grin, and upon seeing that, Reina Ruu shot me back a joyful smile.

"I was about to ask 'Really?' but how could I doubt it when you smile like

that? Still, I get the feeling that this patty is a bit too big...”

“Yeah, that’s because you’ve got to cook it up in the morning on the day of. Burying it in pico leaves overnight drains the moisture and causes it to shrink a bit. That’s why you make it a bit thicker at this initial stage.”

“Ah, so that’s it. Understood. In that case, should Sheera Ruu and I go ahead and prepare 60 of these patties?”

“Yeah, I’m counting on you two. My only note is to make sure you keep the size uniform, alright?”

“Of course,” Reina Ruu replied with another smile, overflowing with confidence and pride.

Her face had been well-sculpted to begin with, but I got the feeling that she had grown even more charming lately.

“Ah, if you don’t mind, could you two also give it a taste, Ai Fa and Gazraan Rutim? If he ate all this, then Asuta would end up full before dinner even started,” Reina Ruu asked, showing how perfectly considerate she was on top of everything else.

Gazraan Rutim gave an easygoing nod in response, then took the plate from me.

“Ah, this is certainly delicious. I’d definitely like to have the Rutim women receive some further instruction, too.”

“Oh? But Ama Min Rutim should also be quite skilled at making burgers by now,” Reina Ruu said with a smile.

That left Gazraan Rutim to just say, “You’ve got me there,” while scratching his head.

As she watched that friendly exchange out of the corner of her eye, Ai Fa grabbed the plate with a rather grouchy look on her face. Then, she scooped up a bit with a spoon and took a bite.

“Hmm... You really have improved your cooking skills, Reina Ruu,” Ai Fa replied with a blank expression.

“You mean it?” Reina Ruu excitedly asked back. “You get to eat Asuta’s

cooking every day, so it really means something to hear you say that!”

The smiling Reina Ruu and expressionless Ai Fa silently stared at one another for a few moments. But just before that silence went on for so long it became awkward, Reina Ruu turned back my way.

“Well then, I’ll be getting back to work. Thank you for your help, Asuta.”

“Yup, I’m counting on you!”

Reina Ruu then turned around and lightly strode back over to Sheera Ruu.

Now then, Ai Fa didn’t seem to realize, but I was feeling a bit concerned about how she was acting. From the way she was firmly clenching her lips, I could sense that she was trying to clamp down on her emotions.

“Hey, are you alright, Ai Fa...?” I stealthily called out.

To be honest, I was worried that she was about to tell me, “Make a tastier hamburger than that!” again.

As she scratched the tip of her nose, her mouth was squirming as if she was trying to hold something back.

The expression that broke out on her face next, though, took me totally off guard. It was a big smile full of every bit as much confidence and pride as Reina Ruu’s had been. And as I just stood there dumbfounded, the grinning Ai Fa leaned into my ear and whispered, “It’s true that she’s improved quite a bit, but your hamburger steak is still tastier.”

Then, I suddenly got nudged with a headbutt to my temple.

“However, she still has improved to a shocking degree. You mustn’t let your guard down, Asuta.”

“Right...” was all I could reply with.

I didn’t exactly see any way that their burgers were worse than mine, though... Still, I decided to keep the embarrassment I was feeling to myself, ultimately.

“Hey! Looks like you’re having a tasty snack there, Asuta!” a wild voice suddenly shouted out.

Glancing over in that direction, I saw a spindly, tall figure and another smaller one standing by the entrance to the kitchen: Kamyua Yoshu and Ludo Ruu.

“Ah, hey guys. Is your meeting with the leading clan heads over, then?”

“Yeah. I somehow managed to get them to agree to my requests. Maybe with this, we’ll manage to finally find some evidence on Cyclaeus by the meeting on the 15th of next month,” Kamyua Yoshu replied, all the while staring at the plate that had returned to my hands.

But Ludo Ruu noticed his gaze immediately, and stomped on over to swipe the plate away.

“This food was made in my house’s kitchen, so I should get it first, right?”

“Ack! Just one bite is fine, but make sure to leave some for me too, Ludo Ruu,” Kamyua Yoshu retorted. It was honestly a bit of a strange feeling, seeing the pair interact so casually.



Apparently Ludo Ruu didn't hate the fishy bodyguard all that much, as he did share a bite with him after all. Literally just a single one, though.

"Ah, Gazraan Rutim, thanks for all your efforts earlier. Did you finish explaining everything to Asuta?" Kamyua Yoshu asked after carefully savoring that one precious bite he had received.

"Yes," Gazraan Rutim answered calmly with a nod. "I believe I explained everything in enough detail."

"I'm glad to hear it. But well, let me just add a little bit on my end," Kamyua Yoshu said, his carefree smile then turning my way. "Hey Asuta, after hearing Gazraan Rutim's explanation, you've probably got an image of Cyclaeus as this seriously crafty guy, right?"

"Yeah."

"But if you were to meet him, that view may end up getting completely overturned. I hope you don't start to think Gazraan Rutim's impression was wrong if that does happen, though."

"Huh?"

I found it even more difficult than usual to tell what he was going on about here. Still, for such an aloof guy, he had a pretty serious look in his eyes at the moment.

"Sorry, I don't really get what you're saying. Could you simplify it a bit more for me?"

"Ah, sorry about that. I honestly only sensed it for the first time myself at today's meeting. You see, it seems that Cyclaeus looks down on the people of the forest's edge even more than I had thought."

"He looks down on the people of the forest's edge...?"

"Right. That wasn't the sort of gaze you directed at your fellow humans. It was more like he was looking at filthy subhuman beasts," Kamyua Yoshu indifferently stated despite how horrifying those words were. "To put it simply, those were the sort of eyes someone would have when looking at slaves... if you didn't see slaves as fellow humans, too. Here in the western kingdom,

though, the only slaves are people from the northern kingdom.”

“The northern kingdom... You mean...”

“Yeah, the enemy kingdom of Mahyudra, where my mother was from. It seems Cyclaeus has been displeased for some time now with the fact that Duke Genos has invited me to come and go in the castle, despite the fact that I have mixed blood from the north. So naturally, the man looks down on me as if I was a filthy beast, too.”

I didn’t know what to say to that.

“Genos is located pretty far south in terms of the western kingdom’s territory. Thanks to that, most folks around here go their whole lives without seeing anyone from Mahyudra. However, Cyclaeus went and summoned slave traders from far away in order to purchase some manual laborers. Of course, that’s nothing uncommon in towns further north... Folks captured from an enemy nation either become slaves or all get slaughtered.”

The more I heard, the more disgusted I felt.

And yet, Kamyua Yoshu just kept on smiling.

“Actually, if he was someone more properly accustomed to handling slaves, it probably wouldn’t be quite so awful. Some owners give rewards to hard working slaves, and others allow them to marry, for example. I’d say there are probably few folks out there nowadays who see their slaves as livestock to be used up rather than as human beings... But Cyclaeus is definitely part of that minority.”

The way he was minimizing it turned my stomach, but I didn’t feel like I was in a position to say or do anything about it. “So what are you getting at, exactly?”

“Well, what I sensed from today’s meeting was that to Cyclaeus, the people of the forest’s edge are an important source of labor... but he doesn’t see them as fellow human beings. I had vaguely figured that may be the case before, but I knew for sure as soon as I saw that murky look in his eyes.”

Gazraan Rutim, meanwhile, was calmly staring at Kamyua Yoshu. And noticing that gaze, the aloof fellow shot him back a gentle smile.

“Even the folks from the post town never look at you all with that much scorn in their eyes, right? Lots of townsfolk may not see the people of the forest’s edge as fellow countrymen, but I can’t imagine many see you as something less than human.”

“The idea of slaves or the discord between the north and the west aren’t things I have a proper grasp on. But that may well be the answer to why Cyclaeus’s gaze caused us to feel so unusually worked up.”

Gazraan Rutim seemed just as calm as always, but I was the complete opposite.

Next to me stood Ai Fa and Gazraan Rutim. Ludo, Reina, and Sheera Ruu were here too. And every last one of them was precious to me. To see such wonderful people as something less than human... That was a mindset that I could never, ever accept.

“Anyway, Asuta, even though you’re a man of the forest’s edge, you look like a westerner. Or at the very least, you certainly don’t have an appearance fitting to someone from the forest’s edge or the north. Thanks to that, there’s certainly a chance that Cyclaeus would treat you like a human being, but don’t let that deceive you.”

“That’s... valuable information, so thank you. But isn’t there pretty much no chance at all of me ever meeting that Cyclaeus guy...?”

“Yeah. And I’ll certainly be praying that never happens, too.”

However, apparently it wasn’t impossible.

Seriously though, that information was absolutely outrageous.

I took a few deep breaths to clear out all the stagnant, awful feelings dwelling inside me, then turned once again to face Kamyua Yoshu.

“So, what sort of request did you make of the leading clan heads, anyway? This is your first time asking anything of the people of the forest’s edge, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. We were short on hands this time around, so I’m having them help out with searching for someone.”

“Searching for someone...?”

“That’s right. The plan is to go around checking out the various towns near Genos. The person we’re searching for is a survivor from the Red Beards. You already heard about that group from Gazraan Rutim, didn’t you?”

I unwittingly gulped.

Just what exactly was he planning?

“You see, we’ve actually been seeking this person’s whereabouts for a while now. After all, if we could just find them, we could clear up the Red Beards’ actions from ten years ago. And since we could work that into a way to expose Cyclaeus’s old crimes, that’s where we’re putting our efforts.”

“But wasn’t that bandit group wiped out ten years back? And they were all judged as criminals, right?”

“Yeah, but this person alone somehow slipped through the militia’s grasp. She was extremely close to the leader of the group, so she should know quite a lot about the situation back then.”

“‘She?’ You’re looking for a woman?”

“We are. The wife of the Red Beards’ leader, Goram Redbeard. Originally she was the man’s reckless and wild right-hand woman, but after they had a child together she ended up taking on the role of waiting around for her husband’s return instead. But thanks to that, she managed to escape the fate that the rest of her comrades suffered.”

The wife of the bandit group’s leader... Would it be possible to get valid testimony from such a person?

Well, I’d just have to leave that up to Kamyua Yoshu and Melfried. Still, there was something else I wanted to ask.

“So you said you’re going to be borrowing some help from the people of the forest’s edge for your search? I’m surprised the leading clan heads agreed to that.”

“Yeah, but they seemed to also recognize that we aren’t getting anywhere until we put some real effort into exposing Cyclaeus’s crimes. Even that Gulaf

Zaza figured a fishy guy like me was still preferable to that crafty old man,” Kamyua Yoshu said with a smile like a Cheshire cat. “At any rate, Melfried can’t exactly go employing any soldier pals of his for such personal business, and he can’t leave Genos very easily himself. So getting their permission was a huge help. Ah, we’re going to be borrowing three men from the Ruu branch houses, so right now we’re having them learn how to ride totos. I’d like to head out from Genos first thing tomorrow morning, after all.”

So the idea was to take some people of the forest’s edge out of Genos on totos, huh? What a crazy plan.

“Tch! That sure sounds interesting! If I wasn’t on guard duty at the stalls, I’d love to come along too,” Ludo Ruu stated in a carefree tone.

“Kamyua Yoshu, we can trust you, can’t we?” I asked, staring at the aloof guy head on.

“Yeah. Exposing Cyclaeus’s old crimes means a brighter future for the forest’s edge too, right?”

At any rate, the leading clan heads had already accepted his proposal. And so, I had to make peace with that fact, too.

“Understood. I guess we’ll just have to wait for everyone to return safely. Do you think you’re going to make it back before the day of the meeting...?”

“Well, the Ruu clan’s hunters happened to be taking a break, so things really happened to line up well there. But I’d like to get back sooner if at all possible. After all, I’ve got no clue what that crafty old Cyclaeus is plotting by pushing things off for half a month.” With that, Kamyua Yoshu’s purple eyes took on a transparent shine. “You all make sure to take care too, alright? At today’s meeting Cyclaeus didn’t say a single word about your business, but I’m still a bit concerned. After all, he can’t exactly ignore you trying to forge stronger bonds with the post town... Anyway, I’ll be looking forward to eating your cooking again however many days from now, alright, Asuta?”

Chapter 4: A Time of Parting

1

The next day, on the 31st of the blue month, we increased the number of bodyguards to four. That was thanks to both Kamyua Yoshu's ominous warning, as well as Ai Fa's opinion that someone had been keeping an eye on us.

The additions were Shin Ruu and a boy from one of the Ruu branch houses who I didn't know all that well. Unfortunately, the Lea clan head Rau Lea apparently wasn't someone we could ask so lightly to take up the job.

"Besides, Rau Lea's got a real short temper anyway. It's a bit iffy, having him deal with townsfolk, right?" Ludo Ruu chimed in.

If that was Donda Ruu's opinion too, then I'd have to say he definitely put some thought into it. After all, those folks from the castle seemed like they would exploit any weakness they could get their hands on.

Still, it was uncertain what we even needed to be on guard for with how things stood, so we just had to keep working away at the stalls for the time being.

Plus, I had an additional concern that felt every bit as serious to me as Cyclaeus's plotting. Naturally, I was thinking about the fact that after today Shumiral would be leaving Genos, and the question of how things stood between him and Vina Ruu.

"How's your leg doing, Vina Ruu?" I called out from the myamuu giba stall over to the giba burger stall.

"Ah, it's okay..." was the relaxed reply that came back.

Fortunately, Vina Ruu was back to working with us as of today. Still, her sprained ankle apparently hadn't fully healed yet, and from what I heard the trip would've been difficult for her if we couldn't provide the wagon for transportation.

But Mia Lea Ruu said they didn't need to worry about having Vina Ruu around to handle things since there were bodyguards anyway, so it was decided for the time being she should alternate with Reina Ruu on a day-by-day basis.

"Hey, when do you think that easterner's going to come by?" Lala Ruu whispered as she worked alongside me in the myamuu giba stall.

"I'm not sure. Normally, this would be around when he'd stop by."

"Ugh, for some reason it's got *me* feeling all on edge. It's not even like he's asking her to marry him, but for some reason it's got me all worked up."

My heart was pounding too, but I wasn't sure I was feeling the same emotions as Lala Ruu. Wait, what had her feeling like that, anyway? I asked her about it.

"I've got no idea! But he seems as serious as if he actually was proposing, right? So that's just got my heart pounding, somehow," Lala Ruu stated, bringing her hands to her chest and breathing a sigh. "Vina really should hurry up and get married already, too. Then she wouldn't have to deal with all this hassle."

"It really would be difficult for Shumiral and Vina Ruu to get together, huh...?"

"Of course! Actually... I can't say I really know all that much about it, but they consider it a pretty big deal in town to go changing gods, don't they?"

"I don't really know either, but from what I hear, that's the case."

"Ah, you didn't know anything about the four great gods to start with, did you? I still can't believe that! Anyway, changing your god means cutting ties with your family, right? There's no way I could do something like that!"

"Mmm, but even if you have to live apart, it's not like you can't ever see each other again... Hmm, I still don't know. I guess it's not really my place to say, though."

"You'd have to live apart anyway if you married into any other house, but I'd hate it if Vina had to leave the forest's edge and wasn't one of our people anymore," Lala Ruu replied, her eyebrows drooping a bit as she sucked in her lower lip.

This girl was a tough one, but occasionally she made some pretty cute faces.

“Then could a foreigner marry into the Ruu clan...?”

“Hmm? Why not? Then Vina could stay as part of our family.”

“Ah, that would work?”

“I wouldn’t really mind. And I don’t think my mom would, either. Dad could be tricky, though...”

Donda Ruu, huh?

How did that man feel about this matter, I wondered...

“Well, I guess it’s just not possible after all, though. Even if we took him into our clan, that easterner wouldn’t be able to serve as a hunter, and besides, he’s someone who does business in Genos’s castle town, right? I can’t imagine a guy like that just abandoning his life up till now to marry into the forest’s edge.”

“But personally, you wouldn’t be upset about it?”

“That’s right. I don’t care who Vina marries, as long as they can make her happy.”

Lala Ruu resembled Ludo Ruu not just in terms of her face, but in her way of thinking, too. But, well, her brother had assumed there was a chance Vina Ruu would leave the forest’s edge, and wished for his sister’s happiness even so.

Still, it seems like it’d be difficult for them to get married either way...

An extreme outsider like me could only imagine just how hard it would be to give up your home, friends, family, and very life up till that point in order to marry into the forest’s edge.

But what about the other way around?

Vina Ruu had a yearning to see the world outside of the forest’s edge. Plus, her people worshiped the forest, not any of the four great gods. So in that case, she shouldn’t have any strong objections to switching gods, either.

That still felt like it would be quite difficult even so, though. Even if she personally didn’t have strong objections to the idea, changing gods would mean she couldn’t keep living in western territory... at the forest’s edge.

Shumiral didn’t have any family, and on top of that, he strove hard at his work

with the merchant group. From what I could recall, he said that after leaving his homeland of Sym, he would spend nearly a year traveling around towns to the west and north. He couldn't just leave Vina Ruu all alone in Sym during that time, without so much as a single relative to keep her company.

Then what if they didn't have kids, and Vina Ruu traveled the world with him...?

No, that didn't seem realistic either.

Shumiral must have thought all this over himself, which was surely what led to him saying it would be difficult.

Anyway, I guess I've just got to hope that Vina Ruu accepts that gift from Shumiral for now...

As I felt a strange sense of ennui, I gave a sigh along with Lala Ruu.

It was then that Ai Fa coldly stated, "You've come again...?" It was like she was some kind of gatekeeper.

"Quiet, you! What sort of attitude is that to take with a customer, anyway?"

It was the girl from the south, Diel.

After sticking her tongue out at Ai Fa, she then walked up to the myamuu giba stall with a smile.

"Hey there! I made it out again! I'll take one please, Asuta."

"Ah, thanks. Huh...? If you were switching every other day, then shouldn't you be buying a giba burger today?"

"Hmm? I mean, they're both tasty, so I'm good with either! And you're over here, so I went with this one," Diel said with a smile so bright it made it hard to believe she had been so abusive back when we first met. Meanwhile, Ai Fa crossed her arms and glared out of the corner of her eyes at the girl's innocent grin.

We had actually opened up to Kamyua Yoshu about this girl yesterday, too. Which meant we told him the circumstances of how she ended up at our stalls, and asked him if there was much of a chance that Cyclaeus had a hand in that.

“Ah, someone related to that merchant group that came from Jeland? Oh, right, the iron sellers that Cyclaeus invited to his manor, yeah? Since they showed up in Genos at a time like this, Melfried of course looked into them. They’re just ordinary merchants, so they wouldn’t be messing with the people of the forest’s edge under Cyclaeus’s orders or anything.”

And so, thanks to those words from Kamyua Yoshu, she was cleared of any suspicions for the time being.

However, the fact remained that she had ties to Cyclaeus, so it really was best to maintain an appropriate distance. And so, I retained a perfectly neutral business smile when facing the girl.

“Ooh, that smells good! Hey, do you think this would heat back up well on a stove?”

“Huh? Why do you ask?”

“I wanna have those guys back in the castle town give it a try! They said there was no way giba meat was edible, and they didn’t believe my story at all!”

That statement gave me goosebumps.

“A-Ah, if you let too much time pass, it may end up going bad! And it would be a real problem if that wrecked someone’s stomach. So please don’t go taking my cooking back to the castle town.”

“Huh?! But once I pay you my coins, I’m free to do what I please with it afterwards, right?” Diel asked, her smile giving way to puffed up cheeks.

Thanks to that, I ended up having to hurriedly rack my brain.

“B-But there are a lot of folks around Genos who aren’t too welcoming to the people of the forest’s edge or giba meat. You’re at least aware of that much, right?”

“Hmm? I don’t really pay attention. Isn’t it just that lots of people of the forest’s edge have scary faces, so everyone’s afraid of them?” Diel said while shooting Ai Fa a hateful look.

My clan head fired back with a chilly glare in response.

“It’s not quite that simple. Giba were originally seen as a symbol of calamity,

so the people of the forest's edge came to be seen the same way because they eat meat from the beasts. Um, and also... Since they changed from the southern god to the western one, people don't really see them as part of the same community, and there hasn't been a very good relationship between the forest's edge and the town up till now."

"What's with that? That's just bizarre! It's been decades since the people of the forest's edge cast aside Jagar, but they're still not accepted as comrades?"

I was astounded to hear that she didn't even know that much.

Still, I guess that made sense for someone from a group of foreigners who only did business in the castle town. Even if they were all citizens of Genos, the people of the forest's edge and the folks from the castle town pretty much had nothing to do with one another. The one exception was of course Cyclaeus, but I couldn't see him going out of his way to talk to his business partners about these issues.

Right... It's not exactly unthinkable for someone from the castle town to go their whole lives without ever seeing anyone from the forest's edge. I guess to them, the relationship between the folks of the post town and the people of the forest's edge may just be somebody else's problem.

This was a new discovery.

But if I brought it up to the people of the forest's edge, they might not see how it matters.

However, I drew myself back from those thoughts to the problem at hand, and replied to Diel, "At any rate, I can't even imagine what sort of commotion it would cause if you brought giba cooking into the castle town. We'd like to just keep on doing business without making waves, so could you please reconsider?"

Diel groaned "Ugggh," for a bit, but eventually she gave a downhearted, "Alright... I just wanted to really leave them speechless. But if that'll cause you trouble, then I'll just drop it..."

Somehow, her face reminded me of a puppy with both ears drooping down.

At any rate, I replied, "Thanks," as I moved the meat and aria to the center of

the iron tray. “You just want the one, right? This dish is two red coins, too.”

“Right! I’m starving, so be sure to make it nice and tasty, alright?” Diel retorted, her mood seemingly recovered as she broke out again in a grin.

I felt like I was about to start smiling too in response, only for another customer to arrive and call out, “Hey, long time no see!”

When I turned to look, I found a western girl with long, dark brown hair and a smile just as bright as Diel’s standing there. And with her proportions that were even a match for Vina Ruu on top of that, I immediately identified her as Yumi, from The Westerly Wind.

“Ah, thanks for coming. It really has been some time.”

“I mean, I’ve got work back at the inn too, so it’s not easy to slip out before the sun hits its peak! But I’ve still been coming by every day, you know.”

“Yes, I’ve heard. Thank you so much for your continued patronage.”

Yumi was one of my precious few regulars from the west, along with Dora and Tara. And even though we hadn’t had many chances to see one another lately, I never forgot my gratitude towards her.

Diel wouldn’t go and pick a fight with my western customers too, right...? I thought, worriedly glancing over. She had both hands on the stall’s counter, looking at me like a puppy begging for food. And her companion Labis had already paid Lala Ruu for the dish.

“Ah, sorry! I’ll make it right away, so hold on just a moment.”

“Okay!” Diel replied with a big grin. She really was unmatched with how quickly she shifted her expressions.

But for some reason, Yumi’s smile then drew back as she started looking Diel up and down.

“I’ve never seen you before. Are you one of Asuta’s friends or something?”

“Hmm? I wouldn’t especially say we’re friends or anything,” Diel replied, turning her way and looking puzzled.

Yumi gave a “Hmph,” back while brushing aside her long hair. “Then are you a

regular here at this shop? Not that I've ever seen a southern girl like you around up till now, though..."

"I guess you could say that. I mean, this is my fourth day in a row coming here, now!"

Not that you paid on that first day, though, I thought to myself with a shrug of my shoulders.

This was no time to just stand here all carefree, though. After all, Yumi was now shooting me a real prickly glare.

"Asuta, what's going on here...?"

"Huh? Wh-What do you mean?"

"You said that you talk to me all polite because I'm a customer, right?! So in that case, why are you talking to this girl who only showed up four days ago like she's a friend?!"

Ah, so that was what had earned me Yumi's wrath?

Now that I thought about it, Yumi had made the same assertion even when it came to young Tara, too. And back then, I had managed to end things without incident by saying that Tara was an acquaintance from before we opened the stalls.

"No, um, you see... I suppose it just sort of ended up that way..."

"What do you mean, it 'ended up that way?' That doesn't explain anything!"

"You're so noisy. If you came here to buy Asuta's cooking, then just be quiet and eat already," Diel nonchalantly stated while biting into the myamuu giba I had handed her.

I couldn't help but think, *You're one to talk!* but I was at least relieved to see she wasn't getting drawn up in Yumi's emotional outburst. Apparently when she was dealing with folks from the south or west, she could actually act pretty rationally.

"I'd say there are only two paths left open to you right now, Asuta..." Yumi stated, clearly in quite a nasty mood. And as she angrily glared at me, she held up two of her slender fingers and thrust them in front of my face. "Either you

do something about that stiff and stuffy way you talk to me, or you treat all your customers the same. Which one will you choose, Asuta?”

“Umm... I’ve been doing business for over a month now, so revising the way I speak at this point would prove quite difficult...”

“Wait, you’re not going to go acting all formal with me now, are you?” Diel asked with an angelic grin. It was just such a carefree smile that it hurt just imagining whether she’d get angry or cry if I betrayed those expectations.

And so, I had no choice but to reply, “No, I’m not,” only for Yumi to wail, “No fair! Why do you keep picking just on me?! I’ve known you way longer!”

“Stop shouting, or you’ll get the guards called on you for interfering with business,” Diel said with a satisfied grin as she stuffed her cheeks with myamuu giba. I couldn’t help but sigh, but I took care so that Yumi wouldn’t notice.

It was around then that I finally picked up on the chilly glare drilling into my right cheek.

When I turned to look, I found that sure enough, it was my beloved clan head staring at me out of the corner of her eyes.

I tried asking with my eyes why she was angry, but she shot me back a look that said, “Quiet, you.”

That sort of borderline telepathy served as proof that the bond between us members of the Fa clan had reached max level.

“Umm... I don’t believe I’ll be able to make the change all at once, but I’ll try to work towards it, so could we end things peacefully for now...?” I asked, hoping to settle the matter, only for Yumi to bring her face in close with her eyebrows still raised.

“Are you really, honestly going to work on it...?”

“Yes... Er, yup. Well, at least where possible...”

Upon hearing that, Yumi gave a big sigh, then slapped down her two red coins.

“Thank you so much for... Er, thanks as always...”

“It doesn’t seem like you’re trying at all!”

“I-It really is tricky to change so suddenly.”

Still, I guess she’s at least not hitting me like Rau Lea, I thought as I set about preparing the myamuu giba.

“The food’s tasty, and you get all sorts of interesting customers here,” Diel cackled.

Yumi, meanwhile, shot her a sulky glare.

“So, what’s your deal, anyway? It’s rare seeing young women from the south in Genos. Are you part of a merchant group?”

“Yeah. We’re iron sellers from Jeland,” Diel casually replied, tossing the last chunk of her meal into her mouth.

“Iron sellers, huh...? Well, not that it really matters, but why are you dressed like a man?”

“Hmm? I certainly couldn’t imagine walking around the post town in such floofy clothing. Don’t you end up getting targeted by good-for-nothing scoundrels dressed like that?”

“You think I could live here in the post town if I was scared of guys like that? You must’ve had quite the pampered upbringing, huh?” Yumi retorted with arms crossed, looking down upon Diel.

Now that I thought about it, she was actually accompanied by some good-for-nothings back when I first met her. By the way, today she was wearing a narrow wrap for a top, some jangling accessories, and a long skirt that reached from her hips to her ankles, which was a very popular look for folks from the west. And her slender legs could be spied through a slit running down the side of that long skirt, which was quite seductive.

“Well, if that’s the custom for you southerners, then whatever. But you’ve got a cute face, so why not grow out your hair? You’ll get mistaken for a boy looking like that, right?”

Yeah, she was, I thought to myself.

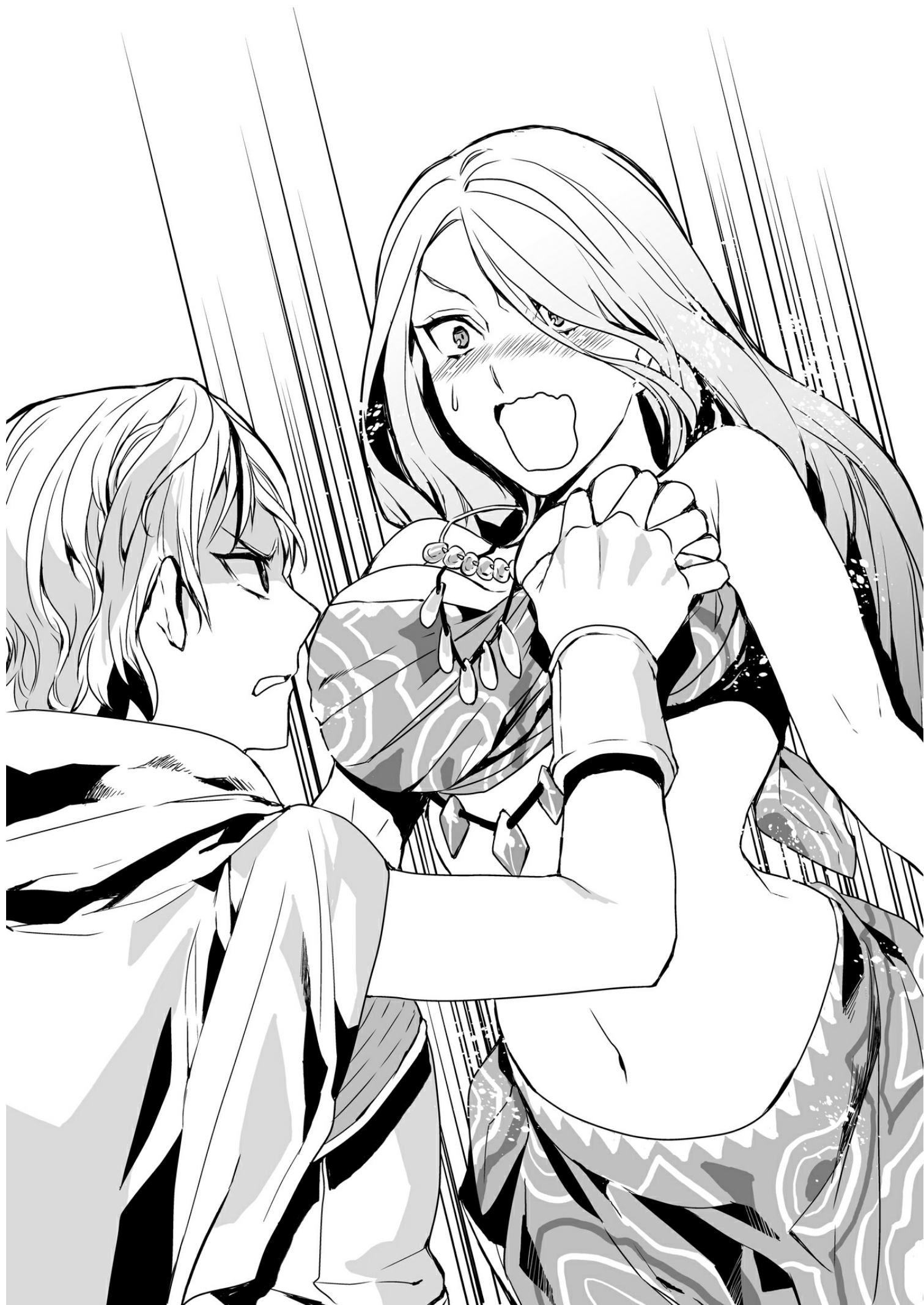
Diel had remained calm and composed up until now, but with that I saw her

face turning visibly redder.

“Shut it! The choice to grow it out or keep it short is mine to make, alright?! Don’t go looking down on me just because you’re a little sexy!”

“Wah!” Yumi wailed, letting out an odd yelp.

Of all things, Diel’s right hand had grabbed a hold of Yumi’s ample chest.



After shaking off the girl's hand, Yumi's face went bright red as she weakly collapsed to the ground.

"W-W-What do you think you're doing?! Don't go scaring me all of a sudden like that!"

"Hmph! So you wouldn't have a problem if it wasn't 'all of a sudden?' You want me to announce it in advance next time, then?"

Diel was sidling on up towards Yumi, her fingers on both hands curled up like claws.

Yumi, meanwhile, was cradling her own torso and shrinking backwards with a look of bewilderment on her face.

It was then that Ai Fa finally said, "Hey," and grabbed a hold of Diel's slender shoulder. "Don't cause a commotion in front of the stalls. I see you still haven't learned your lesson at all, southerner."

Diel turned towards Ai Fa, clearly taken aback.

And though Labis had just stood there out of the way like a shadow up until now, he grabbed the handle of his long sword and approached my clan head.

"Woman of the forest's edge, remove your hand from Master Diel. If you don't, I will cut you down..."

"Oh? It seems quite a few of you southerners don't have much respect for the law..."

Ai Fa didn't look all that impressed in the least, but she still let go of the girl's shoulder.

It was then that Diel gave an unrestrained shout of, "Cut it out, Labis!" and then grumbled, "I shouldn't have done that... Sorry, Asuta."

"Ah, no..."

"And I'm sorry to you, too. I just lose control when people say stuff about my hair..."

"Y-Your hair...?"

"Because it's this dirty-looking color, I can't grow it out and have it look all

pretty like yours. If that weren't the case, then I really wouldn't ever be mistaken for a man, even when dressed like this..." Diel muttered, then she bit her lip and stopped talking.

Yumi slowly rose to her feet, then walked over towards Diel while guarding her chest.

"I wouldn't say it's especially dirty or anything. It's just a bit uncommon."

"How can you say that?! It looks like an animal's fur!" Diel wailed, her face twisting up with sadness as she roughly rustled her hair.

That hair of hers was an unusual, speckled dark brown. And it was true that it had reminded me of a dog or cat or something. But I hadn't ever thought it was "dirty" in the least.

"I see. Well, people all have their own preferences," Yumi replied while placing a hand atop Diel's rustled hair. "I didn't think it was dirty at all though, which was why I said it would be good to grow it out. Still, if that made you mad, then I'm sorry."

Diel just silently hung her head. Before long, though, she glanced up at Yumi, who had a truly apologetic look on her face.

"You're not angry...?"

"Yeah. You just surprised me a bit, there."

"Ah, I see. It was soft and felt nice, y'know."

"Don't go saying stuff like that!" Yumi shouted back, ruffling Diel's hair even further.

The girl from the south just kept laughing away as she fled from Yumi's hand, though.

"Sorry again. I'll go ahead and leave for today. After all, I've got work to take care of once the sun hits its peak... Asuta, do you mind if I come again tomorrow?"

"Huh? Ah, of course not."

"Thanks," Diel replied, and with that she swiftly departed.

And after shooting Ai Fa one last glare, her companion Labis followed after her.

“What an oddball! But maybe she wasn’t such a bad person after all...” Yumi mumbled with a sigh.

“Are you alright?” I asked, only for her face to go red again for some reason as she hid her chest and shot me a scary look.

“Just hurry up and make mine already! I’ve still got work left, too!”

“Huh? Right, my apologies...”

“Wording!”

“Ah, sorry!”

It was like I was dealing with Mida or something.

Lala Ruu was looking away while stifling a laugh, while Yumi angrily snatched the myamuu giba out of my hand.

“Geez, I came here today to have a serious conversation, but everything got completely out of hand... Hey, Asuta, you sell your cooking to The Great Southern Tree and The Sledgehammer, right?”

“Hmm? Yeah...”

“You tweak the flavors there to meet the tastes of their customers from the south and east, don’t you? But if a westerner like me were to eat one, which would you recommend?”

“Huh? What would the purpose behind that question be, though?”

“You’re not doing that intentionally, are you...?”

“Of course I don’t mean to... Er, I’m not.”

Lala Ruu’s shoulders were trembling, and Yumi gave yet another sigh.

“Apparently a lot of customers from the west have been heading to those two inns, lately. And it seems that was enough to finally make my dad get up off his butt.”

“‘Off his butt...?’ What do you mean?”

“I still don’t know just yet. He might be thinking of trying to have you make food with karon or kimyuus meat rather than giba.”

Yumi’s father was the owner of The Westerly Wind, and he apparently didn’t want anything to do with the people of the forest’s edge or giba. However, he wasn’t a true child of Genos, as he had moved here from another town when he was young. Yumi’s analysis of the situation was that there was no real reason or circumstances behind his prejudice. It was just the result of having lived in the post town for such a long period of time. Her reasoning was that since she had the same sort of opinion about the people of the forest’s edge, and yet she was able to overcome it thanks to our meeting, then he could too.

“Hmm, but there’s no point if I’m not using giba meat. I think I said this before, but my goal in starting this business was more to spread how delicious giba is than to earn coins.”

“Right, I get that. But that stubborn old man of mine said I should go give it a taste to see how skilled you really are. Up till now, he would get angry when my mom or I would sneak out to buy your cooking! That’s amazing, isn’t it?” Yumi said, bringing her face in closer while looking a bit desperate. “The rest would be up to your skills, right? If I can convince him it’ll be tasty, then you could get him to eat your cooking, and then maybe that’ll finally break through that hard head of his! Er... was I being real selfish with my thinking there?”

“Ah, no! You’re definitely right. In fact, I’m super happy just to hear you got him interested.”

If I could sell my giba cooking to an inn both run by and serving westerners, that would be a huge step forward.

If it was possible, I would have liked The Kimyuus’s Tail to be the place I took that step, but I couldn’t exactly let a great opportunity slip away.

Plus, it seems like the evidence from that incident ten years back isn’t being treated as all that important. Once I can be sure that Cyclaeus isn’t keeping an eye on Milano Mas, I should push real hard to get The Kimyuus’s Tail to do business with me, too.

As that thought ran through my head, I went ahead and shot Yumi an earnest smile.

“Thanks. If your dad really does have an interest in my work, then I’ll give it my all to teach him just how delicious giba meat really is, Yumi.”

Yumi’s eyes opened wide.

Was that because of the heat coming off the iron tray from below? I got the feeling that her cheeks were turning a bit red, too.

“What the...? You’re talking to me normally?”

“Ah, yeah, I guess so. I still can’t help but feel a bit self-conscious about it, though.”

“And you remembered my name...?”

“Huh? How bad do you think my memory is?!”

Though with that said, I got the feeling that I really may not have had a chance to say it even once. And that didn’t just go for Yumi. I didn’t really have many opportunities to call Balan or Aldas by name, either.

With a giggle, Yumi pulled back.

“That makes me really happy, somehow...”

“Huh? How, exactly?”

“Never mind! Anyway, which one would you recommend? The Great Southern Tree, or The Sledgehammer?”

“Ah, um, let’s see... I’m planning to change the content of the dishes a bit starting from tomorrow on, but at The Sledgehammer I use a special spice from Sym called chitt seeds, while the dish served at The Great Southern Tree would probably be easier for you to adjust to. By the way, have you ever eaten anything that uses tau oil...?”

“No. That’s a condiment from Jagar, isn’t it? I only know the name.”

“I see. Well, it’s not as peculiar of a taste as chitt seeds, so it should definitely still be easier to eat. But honestly, I only had customers from the east and south in mind when I came up with both dishes.”

“Got it. Well then, I’ll give The Great Southern Tree a try first! I’m really looking forward to it,” Yumi said with a big grin. She looked happier than usual,

which I was glad to see. And the fact that a westerner like her was so concerned about me made me even gladder still.

“Thanks. I’ll give it my all not to let this opportunity you’re giving me go to waste.”

“Yeah, good luck! But if I really don’t think it’s tasty, I’ll have to be honest and say so.”

“Right. I look forward to hearing your impressions, Yumi.”

With that, Yumi left with a smile and I breathed a contented sigh.

And then, I felt a stare on my right cheek again. When I turned to look, I found that sure enough, Ai Fa was silently glaring at me.

I asked, “What are you mad about?” with my eyes, and hers shot me back another “Quiet, you.”

Perhaps she wasn’t too fond of this telepathy thing we had going on?

Anyway, while I was thinking that, a tall man in a cloak approached from the north.

This was an eastern customer, but it wasn’t Shumiral or Sanjura. He was easily over 190 centimeters tall, which was rare, even for someone from Sym.

“Welcome. Do you just want one?”

“No, two, please,” the man replied, lowering his hood.

It really was uncommon for a customer from the east other than Shumiral or Sanjura to go out of their way to show me their face.

“Asuta, do you, remember me?”

“Huh?”

“I am, the assistant leader, of the Silver Vase, Radajid Gi Nafassiar.”

I honestly didn’t recognize his face at all. His hair and eyes were black, and he had a long, oval-shaped face like many folks from Sym.

However, I did recall that there was one member of the Silver Vase who was this tall.

“Right. Are you on your own today?”

“Yes. Today, is busy. So everyone, will come, separately to, make their, purchases,” Radajid stated, then he glanced over at the giba burger stall.

“Asuta, I have, something to, discuss regarding, Vina Ruu.” Vina Ruu then slowly looked over our way, and in a voice so low it barely reached me, Radajid added, “Our leader, Shumiral, had sudden business, to take, care of. He will, be late, in coming, to see, you two.”

“Sudden business?” I asked back.

With his eyes still fixed on Vina Ruu, Radajid nodded and answered, “Yes. He said, he will come, around when, you wrap up, business with, your stalls, for the day. He will, meet you, without fail, at The, Kimyuus’s Tail. That is when, he shall say, his farewells.”

“I see. I suppose it’s your last day doing business here, so there must be all sorts of things to take care of... Wait... Shumiral already knew that Vina Ruu came to town today?”

“Yes. Shumiral has, been in, the castle town, since this, morning. But one of, our comrades, told him, about your, stalls. So Shumiral, is aware.”

“Got it.”

Thinking about my regulars, I realized the sun had almost hit its peak, but I still hadn’t seen Pops’s group, either.

The conversation with Yumi had gotten my spirits up quite a bit, but that ended up dashing them.

“Shumiral will, come without, fail. But for now, I will, hand him, this meal,” Radajid stated, looking back my way. “All ten, members of, the Silver Vase, will come, say our, goodbyes. We are grateful, to have met, you all.”

“Ah, that should be my line. I feel truly blessed having met you folks.”

“He will say, farewell after, your business, is done,” Radajid stated in an emotionless tone. However, his black eyes narrowed ever so slightly, and I couldn’t help but feel he looked just a bit happy, in the same way as Shumiral.

The sun was now at its peak.

After waiting for Li Sudra to show up to take my place, we headed on over to The Sledgehammer. And when we did so, we entrusted the jerky for Pops's group to Sheera Ruu. There were 20 kilos of it there, which I had easily managed to gather from the Ruu and the six clans under them, as well as five other small nearby clans.

The payment of 30 white coins wouldn't work out to all that much once it was split twelve ways. But this time around, rather than prioritizing small clans like I had done before, I simply distributed the work evenly wherever I could.

And with my clan head's permission, I also went ahead and prepared a little something extra to show my appreciation for those regulars of mine.

It was something I was presently experimenting with when I could find the time and, well... I wasn't quite sure whether or not it was worthy of the name yet, but I suppose I'd call it giba bacon. In other words, I was undergoing trial and error to see if I could make the jerky, which was as hard as tree bark, a little bit less firm.

Use salt to remove moisture, then after it's dried out, grill it with herbs. That was the process for making jerky at the forest's edge, and at its core, that was also pretty much how bacon was produced. But jerky prioritized preservation above all else, so it thoroughly eliminated all the moisture inside the meat. Thanks to that, it ended up so tough that a weakling like me had trouble even chewing through it.

Of course, considering there were no refrigeration devices here in this world, and the climate at the forest's edge and around Genos was akin to early summer in Japan, prioritizing preservation certainly made sense. Still, could I manage to get it closer to the bacon I was familiar with, even so...? How much could I sacrifice preservation, and just how soft could I make it? I was trying out all sorts of things whenever we made jerky at the Fa house in order to find those answers.

The amount of salt, the time the meat was salted for, how long it was left to

dry after being removed from the salt, how long it was smoked with herbs, whether there was room for improvement in the smoking process, if pico leaves could be used effectively to dry it out in the same way... There were just too many variables at play, and I was finding it difficult to arrive at an answer. At present, I could make it so that even I could bite into it, but in exchange it wouldn't even last for a full week.

I definitely still hadn't reached my ideal result. However, when I tried boiling it up with poitan and aria like a traveler would do, I found that it was still dramatically tastier than the current jerky was.

With the jerky, you needed to boil it till it got all mushy, leaving you with nothing but rubbery chunks of meat. But with this new pseudo-bacon, you could eat it while still leaving a good bit of the delicious flavor intact.

I of course used rib meat, and I left more fat clinging to it than with the jerky, which made a big difference in terms of taste. But at any rate, I added two kilos of that pseudo-bacon to the order.

Before leaving the stall, I left three messages with Sheera Ruu: That they needed to eat it within seven days, that it didn't need to be boiled as much as normal jerky, and that this was my thanks to them for always coming to the stalls over this past month, so I didn't need any payment for it.

Did such actions go against the customs of the post town?

Even so, at least when it came to Pops's construction company and the members of the Silver Vase, I couldn't help feeling the need to give them something to show my gratitude. But I was undeniably feeling a touch nervous as we walked south down the stone highway towards The Sledgehammer, thinking that if we all met up and they thrust the pseudo-bacon back at me, then I'd probably end up crying into my pillow over it.

Our current group consisted of me, Vina Ruu, Shin Ruu, and Ai Fa. Ludo Ruu and the boy from the branch house stayed behind at the stalls.

And as she stood next to me, Vina Ruu gave a sigh full of utter misery.

"Are you alright, Vina Ruu...?"

"Yeah... But if it's possible, I'd prefer to get all the troublesome stuff dealt

with sooner rather than later...”

As she walked unsteadily along, her right leg dragged ever so slightly. I couldn’t spy any expression on her face, but I’d still say she seemed rather uncertain even so.

Is she going to accept that gift from Shumiral?

I’d felt that question welling up in my throat for a while now, but I had somehow managed to hold it back so far.

Though it had been pretty bumbling, Vina Ruu was still someone who had tried to make a move on me. And so, it probably wouldn’t be good for me to be asking her that sort of thing about Shumiral.

What had Vina Ruu been feeling as she shot me those passionate glances? And what sort of emotions had been swirling deep inside her then? Was it curiosity toward my mysterious background? Had her longing for the outside world provided some sort of added value? Or was it just pure affection? I had no way of knowing, and maybe the same was even true for Vina Ruu.

The people of the forest’s edge likely relied on their intuition when choosing a partner even more than folks did back in my old world. Mia Lea Ruu had confessed her feelings to Donda Ruu after only meeting him twice, and her daughter Reina Ruu certainly hadn’t taken long to do the same with me.

Of course, maybe I was being a bit hasty extrapolating those two examples out into being true of the nature of their people in general. But Vina Ruu was related to both of them, and she had come at me rather hard and fast, too.

Still, just how exactly did she feel about Shumiral?

What were her thoughts on what he had said to her?

There was no way an awkward guy like me could even begin to imagine.

“What is it? You’ve been looking disheartened for a while now,” Ai Fa said, bringing her face in closer as we walked. “If there’s something concerning you, Asuta, then speak up rather than keeping it to yourself.”

“No, it’s nothing. I was just thinking a bit,” I said with a shake of my head as Ai Fa shot me a glare about 20% more piercing than usual. “What about you,

though? Are you sensing that gaze again today?”

“No, not today. And I’m hoping yesterday was someone who just happened to be keeping an unusually persistent eye on us.”

But at least until that was certain, Ai Fa wouldn’t let her guard down.

Still, there was half a month left until the day of the next meeting.

The Ruu clan were in a period of rest, so it was one thing for them, but Ai Fa couldn’t exactly ignore her hunting responsibilities that long. After all, less giba being hunted around the Ruu settlement meant more of them appearing elsewhere, as they ate up all the food.

The period when the Suun clan were shirking their duty as hunters had caused quite a bit of disturbance, but at the very least in the area around the Fa house, the number of giba still hadn’t really started thinning out at all. And the nearby Fou and Ran clans also seemed to still be making rather steady catches, too.

“I plan to head into the forest every other day until the 15th day of the white month,” Ai Fa stated as if she had been reading my mind. And then, she shot me a glare from real close. “And so, I also intend to ask the Ruu clan to take over my guard duties every other day. But you better not go acting recklessly when I’m not watching, Asuta, or I’ll make you regret it.”

“Got it. Wait, when have I been reckless in the post town to begin with, anyway?”

“You got slugged by that girl from the south just a few days ago now, didn’t you?” she retorted, looking at me like she was a cat with its hackles raised, and then she poked me in the shoulder.

It seemed like her mood took a turn for the worse the second we started talking about Diel.

“You two have quite a dynamic going, don’t you...?” Vina Ruu murmured.

Ai Fa turned her way, reining in the anger on her face as she did so.

“You seem rather weakened. Does your ankle still hurt, eldest daughter of the Ruu?”

“No... It’s more my heart that hurts when I see you two acting so comfortable with each other...”

That statement caused my heart to skip a beat.

However, Ai Fa just tilted her head and looked confused.

“You have a lot of family in the Ruu clan, don’t you? So why should such a sight pain you?”

“You’re seriously asking, aren’t you? That’s what makes you so hard to handle...”

I could practically see the question mark forming over Ai Fa’s head.

As she glanced listlessly at my clan head, Vina Ruu gave a sigh.

“Whatever, don’t worry about it... This is my own personal issue to deal with, after all...”

“I see,” Ai Fa answered with a nod. Then, after looking unusually hesitant for a moment, she continued on, “Granny Jiba and Rimee Ruu are both part of the Ruu clan. They’re the only two I know intimately, but that’s enough for me to say... I think that your house is truly blessed.”

“I know all that... My family is precious to me, too...”

With that, Vina Ruu’s face disappeared behind her long bangs.

As for what she whispered next, I may have been the only one to hear it, as I was standing right next to her.

“What is it that I even want, I wonder...?” she murmured with a childlike unease to her voice.



“As of today, my contract with you has come to a momentary close, Asuta,” Nail stated emotionlessly in the kitchen of his inn, The Sledgehammer.

He had a medium build all around, and hadn’t yet hit 30. His hair was dark brown, his eyes reddish-brown, and his skin ivory-white. Overall, he had the appearance of a perfectly normal westerner.

“Thank you for working with me up till now. And I would be truly glad to form

a new contract with you starting from tomorrow onwards.”

“I’m honored to hear you say that. But like I mentioned before, I’d like to switch over to a dish that doesn’t use the pickled chitt starting tomorrow,” I replied while laying out the ingredients I had brought atop my workstation.

“I’ve been secretly looking forward to seeing what you’ll make,” Nail stated as he watched.

Despite the fact that his words were so polite and friendly, his face remained almost eerily expressionless. The man was a bit eccentric, in that he adhered to the customs of the east and strove not to let his emotions show.

“I somehow managed to get the flavor to come together. I’d like you to give it a taste today, so I’ll go ahead and get to work.”

The dish for today was the kimchi hot pot-inspired “chitt hot pot.” To make it, I boiled the giba meat, aria, and tino together, then added pickled chitt and tau oil. And so, my hands were completely free during that boiling step. Thanks to that, after I tossed the ingredients into the pot, I was able to swiftly set about preparing my new dish: the giba sauté arrabbiata I had served Ai Fa and Shumiral two days ago. And since I was just preparing enough for one person, it was an incredibly simple process.

As I silently worked away on the dish, I left Vina Ruu to watch over the chitt hot pot.

Meanwhile, Ai Fa stood by the far wall, which had a window, Shin Ruu guarded the kitchen’s entrance, and Nail watched me work from right next to me. The Sledgehammer was the smallest out of the inns I was familiar with, and so the kitchen was feeling rather cramped with five of us in it.

Back when we were prepared for Zattsu and Tei Suun to attack, there were four bodyguards assigned to us. Three of them stayed outside of the building and kept an eye on both the front and rear entrances. But this time there were only two guards, and so we kept our forces consolidated.

Naudis of The Great Southern Tree had definitely seemed afraid of the hunters of the forest’s edge. However, that didn’t seem to be true at all of Nail. As someone who admired the culture of the Eastern Kingdom of Sym, I guess if

anyone would lament how distant the four great kingdoms could be, it would be him. And so, though the people of the forest's edge faced discrimination for having abandoned Jagar and becoming children of Selva, he seemed to treat them fairly and justly.

He said he didn't take a wife from the east because he couldn't work up the resolve to abandon his god or make her do so...

It seemed that the act of changing gods was seen as a sort of taboo here in this world.

It was no surprise that the ones who were abandoned wouldn't look fondly on such people, but they weren't exactly welcomed with arms wide open by their new comrades, either. That was why the people of the forest's edge were met with such a cold reception from the folks of Genos, right from the very start.

What's their logic there, anyway? Do they find it hard to trust people who can change gods lightly?

But it wasn't as if anyone was making that decision lightly, anyway.

Take Kamyua Yoshu, for example.

He was born with mixed blood from Selva and Mahyudra, and so he spent his childhood in the northern kingdom, but moved to the west after losing his mother. Of course, I didn't know the circumstances behind his birth, especially considering the two nations were at war with one another. I just knew that he lived with his mother as a northerner, changed gods after his mother's passing, and then became a westerner. And I had little doubt that complicated upbringing was what led to him having such a bizarre personality.

Kamyua Yoshu had said he couldn't get proper work with a background like his, and so he had decided to earn a living with his skills as a bodyguard instead. And that he felt a one-sided kinship toward the people of the forest's edge, who faced similar circumstances.

Neither Kamyua Yoshu nor the people of the forest's edge changed gods lightly in the least. And yet, the Western Kingdom of Selva still didn't kindly welcome them.

So I guess folks changing gods for the sake of marriage wouldn't exactly receive the blessings of those around them, either.

I glanced over at Vina Ruu as she stood at the stove next to me, and stealthily gave a sigh.

At any rate, the meat and aria had heated up nicely by now, and so I added the tarapa sauce I had brought along into the pot.

"Is that the same tarapa broth you use at your stalls?"

"Yes. I've found that it pairs very well with chitt seeds."

"I see. Like you, I often use chitt seeds and myamuu together, but hearing you recommend tarapa as well is honestly a bit surprising."

"That's because if you just use tarapa as is, it's too acidic, right? That could be tasty in its own way, but I mix in finely diced aria to add some sweetness."

As I was giving that explanation to Nail, I wrapped up with preparing the dish.

My giba sauté arrabbiata was complete.

"Please, go ahead and dig in. I believe this dish is a match for my giba chitt."

"Right. At the very least, it smells just as good."

With a serious look on his face, Nail picked up the spoon.

Then, when he took a bite of the loin meat coated in red sauce, he went, "Ah," and covered his mouth.

"Wh-What is it?"

"This won't do... I just can't keep my mouth from grinning."

"Ah, that makes me really happy to hear," I replied, breaking out in a smile of my own.

It wasn't like there was anyone from Sym around, though, so I didn't see what the issue was with just letting his emotions show.

"I am incredibly ashamed... Ah, this is just so tasty."

Nail kept on eating the dish, his mouth twitching constantly all the while. He somehow managed to remain properly expressionless all the way to the end,

but the haste with which he ate made it clear just how much he enjoyed it.

“Yes, this flavor is simply superb. I can’t possibly imagine it being less popular than what we’ve served up till now,” Nail stated, his plate now cleared. However, his light brown eyes were shooting me something of a worried look. “But we’re just talking about this one dish, right...? Of course, I had you alternate the dishes day by day based solely on my inability to choose to start with...”

“Right. I was thinking of preparing two different dishes for you again, and so I’ve been experimenting with a new soup too, but I haven’t gotten that to come together just yet.”

I had attempted an arrabbiata soup to meet the same needs, but perhaps because I was using a still-incomplete tarapa stew for it, the taste seemed somehow lacking.

In the sauté, the meat was the star. And I felt the sauce worked perfectly to support that, with its wonderful mix of tarapa and chitt. But as a soup, it just seemed like it was missing something. Apparently taking my giba meat broth and adding just tarapa sauce and tau oil wasn’t enough to bring it into harmony with the spiciness of the chitt seeds.

“With the pickled chitt, you use, um... salted maru, was it? At any rate, it was a type of seafood. And apparently, that was playing a pretty huge role in the chitt hot pot.”

It was certainly possible that I arrived at that conclusion not through some sort of common sense, but instead based on what I could recall of the kimchi hot pots I’d tasted and what I knew of Italian cooking.

Even without seafood, there was still consommé and bouillon... But at any rate, the stock I was using was clearly lacking, and it was bugging me.

Just boiling the giba bones should give me a rich stock, so maybe that was enough. Perhaps like with the stew, if I carefully heated a variety of vegetables with it, that would do the trick.

But that would require a ton of time, effort, ingredients, and firewood. And so, that method just wouldn’t work when we were talking about selling at a

price of one meal for two red coins, and just one hour to work with.

“The soup dish you’ve made until now has proven quite popular with my customers. If there’s no new soup to be added to the menu in its place, then I may end up hearing quite a few complaints,” Nail stated with a serious look in his eyes. “Asuta, as I said before, I have no issues whatsoever with the flavor of the meat dish you just presented to me. Would it be difficult to alternate between it and the soup dish you make using pickled chitt...?”

“Ah, hmm... Let’s see... Well, this is a personal matter coming from my side, but I currently need to reevaluate the cost of my ingredients.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

“You see, I went and revised the price I buy giba meat for throughout the settlement at the forest’s edge. I had been getting it for far too cheap up until now, so we raised it to a fair rate instead. Even so, though, it’s still cheaper than karon meat.”

Nail nodded in response, then said, “It’s true that I was worried about whether or not you would be able to make a profit when I heard you would be using my pickled chitt. How much do you make currently, then? Ah, but I don’t mean to force it out of you, so you don’t have to say if you don’t want to.”

“I don’t mind. Let’s see, as things stand... I make 9 red coins of profit for 30 dishes of the chitt hot pot.”

Surprising as it may sound, when we bought giba meat from other clans now, the cost-price ratio swelled up to 85%. It was enough to cause even Nail’s eyes to open wide in shock.

“You sell your cooking for 60 red coins, but only 9 of them end up as profit?”

“That’s right. Back when I was getting the meat for cheap I earned 30 red coins in profit, so I wasn’t all that worried about such matters. But this honestly doesn’t work as things stand, businesswise...”

However, I was the one who went and raised the price on meat. My own negligence was at fault here, for letting myself rely on the cheapness of the meat and not paying enough attention to the cost-price ratio.

The only thing I could say in my defense was that I had been working hard each day and had trouble squeezing in time to experiment with cooking, which was why I had little choice but to go with dishes based on kimchi hot pot and pork kimchi.

“Still, I understand what you’re saying. I’ll be working on developing a new dish from here on out, but until I’m happy with it, I’ll keep on preparing the chitt hot pot like I have up till now.”

“But your profits...”

“If I make the customers mad over something like this and giba cooking ends up with a bad reputation, that would really be putting the cart before the totes. So at least for now, I think this is the best path forward. And I’ll give my all to coming up with a new dish good enough for you to sell.” There was just one more thing I wanted to add after that. “Still, what’s really adding to my ingredient costs for the chitt hot pot is the fact that I use the pickled chitt I purchase from you to make it. But if you were to make the chitt hot pot yourself and sell it, you should certainly be able to earn a profit from that, right?”

Actually, he should already be making a profit from selling giba cooking to his customers, so if he made it himself, then logically he could add my profits to what he currently made. And yet, he just sadly looked down and shook his head.

“I have some degree of confidence in my cooking skills, but I don’t believe I could ever make the same dishes and provide the same flavor as you, Asuta. And if I put out something worse than what you make, then I would be inviting the displeasure of my customers.”

“You think so? That’s a shame.”

“But Asuta, from what you were saying... Does that mean it would be possible to buy giba meat from you?”

“Huh? Yes, of course,” I replied, my heart skipping a beat.

Nail had been looking downhearted, but suddenly, his eyes were brimming with anticipation.

“In that case, please allow me to do so. The flaws would stand out clearly if I

attempted to make the same dish as you, but if I can make something that's properly my own, then I believe that would be worth offering to my customers." With that, Nail was no longer able to hold himself back from smiling. "And even more than that, I personally wish to eat giba meat, too. Lately, the fact that I feed my customers giba while I have to eat kimyuus and karon has been all I can think about..."

"You really want to buy raw giba meat...?"

"Yes. I can't buy too great an amount, but, well... It doesn't cost more than karon meat, right?"

"O-Of course not! Right now, I'm thinking of selling it for the same price that karon goes for around town. Though if things go well, I may want to revise the price at some point..."

"In that case, I certainly feel fortunate. After all, I'll be able to buy giba meat while it's still cheap," Nail said, bringing his fingers together in the way that I'd often seen folks from Sym do. "Please, sell me giba meat. I'd like enough for ten meals each day to begin with, if that's alright."

Ten meals at an inn worked out to roughly 2.5 kilograms. And at the same price as karon, it would only be 10 red coins or so of profit.

But even still, I finally had someone who wanted to purchase raw giba meat. Honestly, I ended up turning towards Ai Fa without even thinking.

My clan head remained expressionless, but I could see some joy in her narrowed eyes as she stared back at me.

"Nail, thank you. Thank you so, so much."

"I'm very glad at this turn of events, too. Giba meat has an entirely different sort of appeal to it than kimyuus or karon, and so I'm sure many more folks will end up seeking it out in the future," Nail replied, then he said, "Excuse me," and turned his back to me.

With that he disappeared into the pantry, and returned before long holding a small jar and a reasonably-sized cloth bundle.

"This is the salted maru I use in pickled chitt," Nail stated, placing the jar atop

my work station and removing the lid.

I peered inside with brimming curiosity, and saw that the jar was packed about halfway full with these little, white, translucent things. I couldn't really make out their shape very well, but they were generally around a centimeter big and had long, slender bodies. If I had to guess, I'd peg them as something like krill or shrimp that had then been salted.

"These are caught in the western territory, so they're not all that rare of an ingredient. You should be able to find it at pretty much any shop handling things like myamuu and rock salt. And one of these jars would cost you two red coins."

"I see! You said it's normally used as an appetizer when drinking, right?"

It was probably classified similarly to fermented squid paste. It might not go together if I just threw it into the tarapa sauce, but still, there apparently weren't any nearby oceans and you couldn't get much from the rivers around Genos. Even this little bit of seafood was invaluable to me.

"Thank you. I'll go buy some today and start experimenting to see if I can use it in my dishes. What's this bundle?"

"This is dried milk. A merchant from Sym dropped by this morning, and I purchased it just like we had agreed."

"Ah, cheese! Ooh, and there sure is a lot of it!"

"Yes. I was able to buy five, and I will yield them all to you this time around."

The Ruu clan had also asked to buy some, so I would equally divide it and each of us would get two and a half of these 400-500 gram blocks of cheese.

I turned again to face Ai Fa, and found my beloved clan head covering her mouth and shooting me an angry glare. As I well knew, her favorite dish was the dried milk-stuffed hamburger steak I made with the camembert-like cheese.

She's not from Sym or anything, so she should just let herself smile when she's happy, I thought to myself.

"Thank you! We ate up what we bought from you before in no time at all, so this is a big help."

“I’m glad to hear that it brought you such joy... Though you looked even happier than that when you learned you could sell me giba meat,” Nail said, breaking out in a slight smile. “As a man of the forest’s edge, you find joy in dried milk from Sym, and though I am a westerner, giba meat brings me pleasure. It’s an exchange no one will ever know of, being in a tiny little shop such as this, and yet I find it quite precious. I hope that this bond between us lasts forevermore, Asuta.”

3

Once we finished up our work at The Sledgehammer, we headed out for The Great Southern Tree next.

The Sledgehammer was a bit removed from the stone highway, in the middle of what could be called a residential area. And so, we ended up having to pass through a complex web of narrower roads first.

Currently, it was about an hour or so after the sun had hit its peak. By this time most folks were working in either shops alongside the highway or the farms to the south, so there weren’t as many folks passing by.

“Man, today sure has been productive. My new dish went over well, we got a hold of some dried milk, and I even made arrangements to sell giba meat.”

Vina Ruu was still looking listless, so I didn’t want to get too worked up in front of her. Even so, I couldn’t help but want to whisper that to Ai Fa.

“It certainly sounds like good news. But you still need to prepare an additional dish for that shop to sell, correct?”

“Yeah, but thanks to Gilulu we can cut down the time spent commuting to the post town by quite a bit, and it looks like I’ll be able to leave preparing the giba burgers to Reina and Sheera Ruu, so that should earn me plenty of time to spare. I’ll be able to make it work out somehow.”

“Then are you saying you’re going to keep feeding me food made with those red seeds...?”

“...Maybe, but like I said, I’ll make your portions less spicy.”

“Such consideration from you only makes me feel all the more annoyed,” Ai Fa said with a pout, angled so that the others couldn’t see.

“Don’t sulk so much. I’ll make you some hamburger steak with dried milk in between the taste tests.”

“Do you think you can earn my favor whenever you please just by bringing that up?”

“Huh? Well, it makes you happy, right?”

That earned me a kick in the leg.

With that, I decided to hold myself back from getting too excited.

Still, Nail’s definitely a unique case. He was born here in the western kingdom, but his thinking may be closer to someone from Sym. But it’s not like everyone’s going to accept giba meat that easily.

Even so, this was still a big step forward.

It was possible that Naudis of The Great Southern Tree might grow interested in cooking with giba meat before long, and it was looking hopeful now that I could forge a bond with The Westerly Wind. Plus if I could talk Milano Mas into it, maybe I could even get him serving giba cooking at The Kimyuus’s Tail.

Just a few days ago things had been feeling hopeless, but today I had managed to make a huge breakthrough.

But it’s times like this where it’s most important to handle things slowly and carefully rather than rushing, I thought to myself, my footsteps growing lighter as I went. Today is the fourth day of my fourth round, so that means there are six days left till I enter into new contracts with the stalls. Maybe this time I’ll ask for two days off to devote to experimenting with my cooking...

I was talking about my first time off in over 20 days, and yet that was where my brain went. I really might have been a bit of a workaholic.

Anyway, as I walked along feeling exhilarated by such thoughts, Ai Fa suddenly grabbed my right arm. With that, I had to come to a sudden stop, and the same was true for everyone following behind us.

Before I could ask her why she had done that, though, I spied the answer

walking our way.

“Asuta, what a coincidence. What are you doing in, a place like this?” a voice asked with a slightly stilted command of the western tongue.

And sure enough, when the man flipped back his leather hood and revealed his long chestnut-colored hair, I also recognized his smiling face. It was Sanjura, who had visited my stall just yesterday.

“Ah, hello there. It really is quite a coincidence. We’re on our way back from work.”

“You do work in a, place like this?” he questioned, steadily approaching.

Ai Fa still seemed oddly on guard, but he was wearing just as gentle of a smile as yesterday.

“Yes. I’ve actually taken on the task of making food for inns, and we’re on our way to another one now.”

“‘Inns...’ Could you perhaps be, speaking of The Sledgehammer?”

“Huh? Yes, that’s correct.”

“I knew it. After all, that place has been serving, giba meat dishes,” he replied, his lightly colored eyes narrow as he smiled even more deeply. What a truly charming grin...

“Ah, have you been staying at The Sledgehammer too then, Sanjura?”

“Yes. I was raised in the western kingdom, but I love, eastern cooking. And so I always choose inns, that serve easterners.”

It was true that if you just ignored the one point that he didn’t hide his emotions, Sanjura seriously looked like someone from Sym. And so, it seemed totally natural for him to be staying at The Sledgehammer.

Mixed blood from the east and west, huh...? I guess he probably had a rather complex upbringing, too.

I didn’t feel especially on guard or anything around Sanjura. But even so, he did have something of a mysterious feel about him. It wasn’t obvious what it was, but something about him drew my attention in a different way than

Shumiral's charms or Kamyua Yoshu's fishiness.

Well, it might just be that it's strange to see someone who looks like he's from Sym letting his emotions show like that.

Whatever it was, it just gave me a real favorable impression of him more than anything. And so, I wore a big grin on my face as I went to say farewell.

"Well then, we have work to get to. But if fate allows, then I'm sure we'll—"

"Hold on. Don't go moving on your own, Asuta," Ai Fa suddenly stated, once again grabbing hold of my arm.

And I was in for a shock when I turned to face her, as her blue eyes had a hunter's fire burning brightly in them.

"W-What's the matter? It's not like he's done anything, right?"

"This man has nothing to do with it. Someone is watching us again," Ai Fa whispered. "It's the same sort of gaze as yesterday, like a poison needle. There's no one else around right now, so I may be able to trace their presence. Just keep feigning ignorance, and make sure not to interfere with what I'm doing."

Taking care to move only my eyes, I glanced around the surrounding area. However, I couldn't spy anyone other than us.

Sanjura, meanwhile, tilted his head and looked a bit perplexed.

"What's the matter? I can't sense anything..."

"Sorry, but shut up for now," Ai Fa crudely stated, then she glanced over at Shin Ruu.

The boy gave a nod, then casually walked up beside my clan head.

"Well? Can you sense it?"

"Yes, faintly... But it's like feeling out a hunter holding their breath."

"Right. I can't imagine any townsfolk are able to hide their presence this well... But anyway, they're to the right." Then, Ai Fa shot Sanjura a quick glance and whispered again to Shin Ruu, "I'll stay here to protect Asuta and the eldest Ruu daughter. Now that you have hold of the presence, can I leave the rest to

you? It may be something of a dangerous task..."

"Understood. It's on the right, and ahead of us... Which means they're between those two houses, right?"

"That may be so. Shall we walk a bit closer?" she asked, then shot Sanjura a clear, open stare. "Man of the east... no, wait, that's not accurate, is it? At any rate, I have something to ask of you."

"Yes? What is it?"

"I'd like you to swiftly depart from this place. Assuming you have nothing to do with this presence, that is."

Sure enough, Sanjura's eyebrows drooped and he just plain looked confused.

"I don't quite understand. But Asuta has work to, take care of next, yes? In that case, I will leave."

"Ah, sorry about this. Er, please don't worry about it, alright?"

I hadn't quite grasped what was going on yet myself, so that vague apology was the best that I could offer.

Sanjura shot me one last refreshing smile, and then he pulled back up his hood.

"I will come by your stalls again, tomorrow. Right now, I'm on my way back from, eating your cooking."

"Ah, really? Thanks so much for the purchase."

"Right. I'll come earlier, tomorrow."

Then, Sanjura likely intentionally took a detour around Ai Fa and Shin Ruu before departing down the path we were coming from, towards The Sledgehammer.

"Alright, let's move. Asuta, eldest Ruu daughter, casually move over to my left side as we walk. As long as you do it before we reach that side road you can see there, that'll be plenty, so make sure not to act unnaturally."

With that, Ai Fa started walking, the hunter's look blazing in her half-lidded eyes. But aside from that frightening glare, she was acting completely natural.

Was someone seriously observing us again?

What in the world is going on? The timing's real questionable, with how it started yesterday morning. If it was someone under Cyclaeus, wouldn't they at least wait till after the meeting to make a move...?

I could feel my heartbeat speeding up.

My legs were growing stiff but I forced them to move, and moved bit by bit over to Ai Fa's left side.

There weren't even five meters left till we reached that side path on the right. It was then that I noticed Shin Ruu was standing to Ai Fa's right, while Vina Ruu was walking directly behind me.

Sure enough, I still couldn't sense a thing. It would just take a few minutes of walking till we made it back to the main road, but for now, it was as quiet as a ghost town.

This certainly didn't seem to be a wealthy area. The tightly packed houses were similar to the ones at the forest's edge for the most part, just one-story homes made of wood. And there was a narrow side road between two of them... When we reached it, Shin Ruu suddenly leapt.

Until that very instant he had been walking along like normal, but suddenly, he vanished from sight. With his hunter's cloak fluttering in the wind, he had taken off in a sprint down the side road.

"Ah!" I shouted without thinking. That was because a small rock had come flying towards Shin Ruu with incredible speed, out of the shadow of the houses. However, the boy charged forwards just as fast, and successfully dodged the attack just by slightly tilting his head.

There was another rock flying our way too, but Ai Fa deflected it with a flash of her sheathed blade.

In the same instant, a small figure leapt forth from the shadow of the houses. With its back to Shin Ruu, it was fleeing further down the path.

The figure was small enough to be a child, and was wearing a fur cloak of some creature other than a giba.

“Halt!” Shin Ruu shouted out in a piercing tone, then he reached out for the mystery figure’s shoulder. In that same instant, though, his body suddenly lifted off the ground.

I had absolutely no clue what was going on.

Regardless, Shin Ruu’s body flipped through the air, and his back slammed down into the ground.

As the boy let out a low groan, the assailant then turned our way. I couldn’t see their face, though, as their hood was pulled down as far as folks from Sym wore them.

They were certainly small, though. In fact, they looked even shorter than Ai Fa or Shin Ruu.

The fur cloak was a spotted yellowish-brown that reminded me of a leopard, but they just seemed to have plain clothing on underneath. As for their skin... it looked like an ivory white? Honestly, it was hard to tell, as it looked thoroughly tanned and a bit filthy. But at the very least, they didn’t look to be from Sym or Jagar.

That small assailant stood five or six meters from us along with the groaning Shin Ruu, and was looking us up and down. Then, they suddenly reached for their hips, slender enough to belong to a woman or child, grabbing for the small crescent-shaped blade dangling there.

“Stop!” Ai Fa loudly shouted. “It is forbidden to draw a blade in town! Why are you prowling around after us like this?!” my clan head demanded, brandishing her still-sheathed blade as she yelled. Then, with her glare firmly fixed on the assailant, she whispered to us, “Stay right behind me, no matter what.”

The assailant’s gaze also seemed to be firmly on us, their hand still gripping the handle of that crescent blade. At their feet, Shin Ruu was attempting to get up, looking to be in a lot of pain. However, in the next moment, the attacker’s small foot smashed into his face, sending blood flying as the boy once more collapsed to the ground.

“I said stop! If you intend to point your blade towards the people of the

forest's edge, then you'll have to deal with me!"

That statement was quite unlike her, but she must have judged that she wouldn't be able to save Shin Ruu otherwise. After all, at this distance, no matter how fast Ai Fa ran, the assailant's blade would come down quicker.

The attacker shook their head, looking hesitant. Perhaps they were at a loss as to whether it was better to turn their back and run, finish off the opponent at their feet, or to go all out and try to strike down this second foe.

After a few seconds of intense silence, our assailant chose the third option: they came running towards us and Ai Fa.

"Get down!" Ai Fa shouted to those of us behind her, then she swiftly bent her knees.

The assailant covered several meters in a flash as they drew their crescent blade. Then, they leapt forwards with a strange yell, and Ai Fa also brandished her blade.

However, neither side's sword cut into the other's body. Instead, the assailant suddenly disappeared.

Even watching from up close, I couldn't immediately tell what had happened.

The small attacker had disappeared from view, and in their place was now a tall figure clad in a cloak. The figure had swung down a sheathed sword like Ai Fa had done, and looking at his face from the side... It was Sanjura, of all people.

"My apologies for interfering, unnecessarily. I was just concerned, so I turned around," he calmly stated, then stood straight up from his squatting posture. As for his long sheathed blade, he was holding it with just his left hand. "You aren't injured, are you? I think the danger, has likely passed."

With that, I breathed a sigh of relief and glanced to my left. Ai Fa's gaze, of course, had long since been fixed that way.

Having been hit from the side by Sanjura, our assailant was now writhing in pain on the ground and clutching their left shoulder.

Sanjura took just three steps forwards, then placed his foot atop the crescent

blade lying there.

“Thank you for lending us your aid...” Ai Fa muttered, still brandishing her blade and looking seriously on guard.

As he looked down on the anguished assailant, Sanjura smiled and said, “Think nothing of it. It is the duty of the people, to help protect order in our, society. We should hand this one over, to the guards.”

With that, there was a swift flash of his blade. With just the tip of his sword, he had flicked back the hood of our flailing attacker, revealing their face. And instantly, my vision was drawn by a brilliant red.

Our assailant was apparently every bit as much of a redhead as Lala Ruu.

“Please don’t resist. Are you a bandit?” Sanjura calmly asked.

With that, the little attacker who had been writhing on the ground sat up while holding their left shoulder.

“You’re calling me a bandit?! Don’t mess with me, asshole!”

That was a boy’s voice, and it sounded far younger than I had expected.

However, his face looked incredibly fierce. His disheveled hair as red as flames reached all the way down to his cheeks. And his yellowish eyes half-hidden behind it were like those of a beast.

On top of that, there were angry wrinkles centered around his brow and he was baring his teeth, with an expression that made him look like some sort of feline predator. His face was just so twisted with rage and hatred that I couldn’t even imagine what it looked like normally.

“You Sym bastard... If you’re going to call me a bandit, then should I take care of you first?”

“You’ve drawn your blade in town, and attacked innocents. If you are not a bandit, then what are you?” Sanjura calmly retorted, looking over the boy... No, that felt like too gentle of a word for this little hellion. “Still, with that appearance... You look more like a hunter of Masara than a bandit.”

“A hunter...?” Ai Fa repeated, reacting ever so slightly.

With that, the raging youth suddenly turned towards my clan head.

“I will never, ever forgive you filthy people of the forest’s edge...”

“What was that? If you have some sort of grudge, then speak it. But if you point a blade my way, then I have no choice but to respond in kind.”

“Shut up!” the boy shouted, suddenly shaking off Sanjura’s right hand.

Silver flashes tore through the air, only for Ai Fa and Sanjura to simultaneously deflect them. Being hit by both their blades, the small throwing knives fell to the ground.

They really did both have some insane reflexes.

Sanjura had needed to shift his posture to swing his blade, and the boy used that opening to snatch up the crescent-shaped sword he had been standing on. And he was inhumanely agile when he did that, too.

“You are all gonna get what’s coming to you! I swear it on my honor as Jeeda, son of Goram Redbeard!”

“What?” Ai Fa questioned, but the boy had already turned around.

For a second it looked like Sanjura was going to chase him down, but with a sigh, he returned his blade to his hip instead.

“He certainly is swift. I wouldn’t be able, to catch up to him.”

Ai Fa was making a face like she was holding herself back from clicking her tongue, but sure enough, she placed her blade back at her hip, too.

My clan head probably could’ve caught up to him considering how quick she was, but she apparently felt she couldn’t leave our side. At any rate, that small figure in the leopard-print cloak disappeared between the buildings in no time flat.

“Goram Redbeard... Hey Ai Fa, that’s the name of that bandit leader that came up yesterday, right?”

The leader of the Redbeards, Goram Redbeard... I was pretty certain that was what Kamyua Yoshu had said. And he had taken along hunters of the forest’s edge on a journey outside of Genos to search for the man’s wife and son.

“Oh, man. Kamyua’s group went the wrong way entirely, huh? What should we even do in a case like—”

“Don’t lose your composure. We have to treat Shin Ruu first,” Ai Fa stated, an intense look in her eyes.

Then, her gaze shifted over towards Sanjura.

“So, he really was a bandit? It is rare for them, to appear in town when, it’s bright out,” Sanjura said with a carefree grin.

I didn’t know if he had nerves of steel or what, but regardless, it looked like I definitely had to revise my initial impression that he wasn’t the sort to get involved with anything violent.

“Still, I felt his shoulder bone break. He won’t be able to get up, to any wrongdoing for the, time being. I think you just need, to let the guards know.”

“Right... Thank you,” I replied, but I was thinking all the while how that was the one thing we really couldn’t do. It seriously made me want to sigh.

Goram Redbeard’s wife and son were crucial witnesses Kamyua Yoshu was searching for. And ultimately, the town guards fell under the jurisdiction of Cyclaeus’s younger brother, the militia captain. So, we needed to capture that boy before the guards could get their hands on him.

When he said he couldn’t forgive the people of the forest’s edge, was he referring to how his father had false charges thrust on him and was executed? In that case, we’ll just have to tell him the truth.

And if the boy still keeps on hating the people of the forest’s edge even so... Well, we’ll just have to deal with that when we get there.

I almost sighed at how complicated everything was getting, but ultimately, I held it back.

This was surely an ordeal that the people of the forest’s edge needed to overcome. Zattsu Suun was the one behind all that wrongdoing, but his people were unable to call him out for his deeds. And there was no guarantee that everyone would think like Milano Mas and Leito, who believed Zattsu Suun’s death was enough to atone for the crimes of the people of the forest’s edge.

That kid's even smaller, so for him to hate someone that deeply... It's just not right.

As I stared down the street where the redheaded boy had disappeared, I prayed in my heart that we could meet him once more, and that he would get a chance to talk to the new leading clan heads.

4

"Shin Ruu! What happened?!" Lala Ruu asked, her face going pale as she grabbed hold of the boy. We had finished up our work for the day and met up with the group from the stalls in front of The Kimyuus's Tail.

Shin Ruu had a large bruise under his right eye and the corners of his lips were all bloody, but he just flatly responded, "I met with an embarrassing defeat."

"What does that mean?! You're not saying someone attacked you?!"

"Stop shouting. You don't want to upset the townsfolk, right?" Shin Ruu chided, still sounding perfectly calm.

And as Lala Ruu clung to Shin Ruu's chest, she shot Ai Fa a glare.

"How did Shin Ruu end up like this when you were with him, Ai Fa?! You should be able to easily beat down any foe, right?!"

"Cut it out. Ai Fa carried out her duty just fine. It was my own weakness that resulted in me failing to complete my task properly, not some fault on her part."

Ai Fa, meanwhile, was holding her tongue. In all likelihood, she had been on guard against Sanjura, which was why she was unable to leave our side. However, saying so would mean revealing that she felt like Shin Ruu would be incapable of guarding against an attack from the man. And as a result, she was left unable to say anything at all, steadfastly holding back from speaking up.

After glancing over at my clan head and seeing her determination, Shin Ruu firmly grabbed hold of Lala Ruu's shoulders.

"These injuries are nothing. I just need to keep on training, so that next time I can carry out my task properly."

“But...!”

“Geez, stop whining. You making a fuss isn’t going to solve anything, now is it? You know, instead of getting mad, it’s cuter if you cry when this stuff happens,” Ludo Ruu chimed in.

“Shut it, you!” Lala Ruu shouted at her brother, her eyes tearing up a bit.

“Oh, you’re crying after all? Hmm... I guess Shin Ruu’s at fault now, too. He should be saying how he’s sorry for worrying you and hugging you tight. That’d put things to rest, right?”

Shin Ruu remained silent, but the blood was clearly rushing to his cheeks.

Naturally, Lala Ruu was even redder still, and was so angry that she was gasping with rage.

Ludo Ruu just chuckled as he looked at them, but then he suddenly got a serious look in his eyes.

“Well, Asuta and Vina look just fine, so I guess it’s alright. But it must have been something for Shin Ruu to get injured like that. Could you tell me the details on the way back, Ai Fa?”

“Yes. I believe it would be best to avoid discussing it when strangers are wandering about, too.”

“Alright, then let’s hurry back to the—” Ludo Ruu started to declare, only for a cloaked group to approach us.

Naturally, it was the Silver Vase.

The man at the head of the group stood in front of me and Vina Ruu, then pulled down his hood. For a second it looked like the eldest Ruu daughter was going to turn away, but then she shot him an angry glare head on.

“Asuta, Vina Ruu, I’m sorry, I am late. I came to say, farewell.”

“Thank you, Shumiral. I’m glad we were able to meet up.”

I was filled with a mix of both relief and nervousness, but even so, I replied with a smile.

Ludo Ruu, meanwhile, just said, “Oh right, there was still that stuff with you

too,” and ruffled his blond hair. “It sure has been a crazy day... Still, it seems like the guards might get called on us if we huddle together in a place like this, right?”

It might not have gone quite that far, but it was certainly true that we were attracting plenty of attention from passersby. After all, we were talking nine people of the forest’s edge, ten easterners, two tolos, and one wagon all gathered together. Even though the stone highway was ten meters or so wide, we ran the risk of jamming things up with numbers like that.

“Um, should we head around to the back of the building? There’s a nice, open space right in front of the path back to the forest’s edge, after all.”

My proposal was quickly accepted, and we swiftly headed that way.

Sheera Ruu had been holding Gilulu’s reins up till now, but I took them from her as we headed south down the road. And as we were walking, Sheera Ruu fell back and got a small package out of the rear of the wagon, then approached me again.

“Asuta, I managed to hand the jerky over to that group of southerners without any issue. I put the coins from that together with what we earned from the stalls.”

“Ah, thanks. So um, what about the special jerky I had prepared...?”

“Right. They seemed quite happy about that, too,” Sheera Ruu replied with a smile. It was a real bright, clear smile for her. “And the leader of the group, that Balan man, handed me this.”

“Huh? What is it...?”

“Apparently it’s a type of fruit wine. And rather expensive stuff at that, too.”

When she unwrapped the cloth bundle, sure enough, what she pulled out looked to be bottles of fruit wine. However, it clearly wasn’t the one-red-coin stuff that folks were always drinking around the forest’s edge. No, it was the type of high quality fruit wine we had once received from Kamyua Yoshu, contained in a smooth, slick bottle. And there were two of them.

“Umm... He said to say that it’s not the custom of either Genos or Jagar to

give such gifts. However, since you went and made a gift for them, you're the one who started it."

I could practically see Pops's angry face ranting away.

"And he said something else too... That even at the latest, he'd be back in Genos for sure in a year. So he said you better still be alive and well when that time comes."

"Got it... Thank you."

Sheera Ruu nodded, then fell back to the rear to put the fruit wine away again.

In her place, Ai Fa leaned in close.

"Asuta, are you crying?"

"As if, you dummy!" I shouted without meaning to.

In response, Ai Fa pouted and said, "Why are you calling me a 'dummy?'"

I of course replied, "Sorry," then I glanced at Shumiral's back as the man walked diagonally in front of me.

After today, it would be quite some time before I saw Pops, Aldas, or Shumiral again. And thanks to that, I could sense the feelings I had been holding back bubbling up inside me.

I'm not gonna cry, you dummy...

I didn't even know who I was calling a dummy that time, but regardless, I just kept on walking.

We followed the stone street south, then took a narrow side path east between two inns, and then our field of view suddenly opened wide.

It was an empty space, with nothing but the bare dirt ground. And further past it was the forest, majestically sprawling onwards.

There were rows of buildings behind us, while the forest stretched out before our eyes. And there was just one long road winding off into the forest, connecting to the settlement at the forest's edge.

Yes, we were currently at the border between town and the forest.

And it was the same place where a while back, those who opposed my business in town and those who welcomed it gathered together in a big, chaotic gaggle.

That was where we finally stopped and faced one another.

Since the forest spread out behind those of us who lived there while the town provided a backdrop for the easterners, it felt sort of like we were acting as representatives for those places as we stood there silently.

“Thank you, for serving us, delicious food, up until now,” Shumiral stated, bringing his fingers together in that unusual manner folks from Sym did and bowing his head.

With that, the men lined up on either side of him all pulled back their hoods together.

The only ones whose faces I had seen were Shumiral, the vice-leader Radajid who stopped by before the sun hit its peak today, and the youth who visited my stall on the first day, whose name I didn’t even know. In all likelihood, that young fellow was the one all the way on the left.

That youth was the first one to try out a giba burger sample, and in turn led his comrades from the merchant group to the stall. And he was also my second ever customer, after only Tara.

It was the following day that I met Shumiral for the first time.

While Pops was shouting about how giba meat wasn’t tasty at all, the members of the Silver Vase all arrived at once. And then Pops’s group showed up too, and it turned into a big mess.

It’s already been over a month since then, huh? Or should I say, man, it’s only been a month...?

As that thought ran through my head, Shumiral stepped forwards and stood in front of me.

Vina Ruu, meanwhile, was on the other side of Ai Fa, who was right by me.

However, Shumiral stopped in front of me first.

“Asuta, I’m sorry to, stop by, so late.”

“Ah, don’t worry about—”

“Today, I was in, the castle town, all day.”

“Huh?”

“I was gathering, information on, Lord Cyclaeus. Looking into, if the bad rumors, I had heard, were true.”

That caught me so off guard that I was left at a loss for words.

Shumiral, however, just apologetically narrowed his eyes.

“I am sorry, for involving myself, when it is not my business. But I wished, to be of help, to you, Asuta. I wanted to know, how dangerous, Cyclaeus was. Yet I had, too little time, and could not, discover the truth...”

“But... why did you...?”

“I did, meet someone who, knew the truth, however. That person, should be able, to aid you. And I believe, they should visit, The Sledgehammer, at some point.”

Someone who knew the truth behind the bad rumors surrounding Cyclaeus...

However, since we were talking about nasty stories Shumiral had heard, they probably weren’t matters directly related to the people of the forest’s edge.

Still, I didn’t care about any of that. I was just happy to hear that Shumiral was so worried about us... and I was also upset.

“Shumiral, why did you go and do something so dangerous? Weren’t you the one who warned us that Cyclaeus was someone we should keep our distance from as much as possible?”

“I understand, your anger, Asuta. But even so, I wanted, to be of help, to you,” Shumiral stated, his downhearted gaze drifting lower. “My apologies. I was unable, to restrain, my emotions.”

I didn’t exactly feel like complaining any further after seeing that sad look in his eyes.

“You’re pretty reckless, huh, Shumiral? Even though you look so calm and composed...”

“Yes. My comrades often, tell me, as much.”

Shumiral was both more of a talker and a lot more passionate than he appeared.

For some reason I felt like crying, but I smiled instead.

“Still, it makes me glad to hear you were thinking of us like that. Seriously, thank you.”

“It was, nothing... That person’s name, is Mikel of Turan. I believe, they will be, of use to you.”

Up until that point the members of the Silver Vase had just silently listened to our exchange, but now one of them slowly stepped forwards.

“The people of the forest’s edge, must meet, with that person. I read, the stars, last night.”

He was a somewhat older man from Sym, but he was just as tall and slim as the rest of the group. However, his face was deeply wrinkled, and I could see the veins on his neck and arms. He had a gentle gaze, though, and felt sort of like an older Shumiral in a way.

“If the, people of the forest’s edge, meet with, that person, they will gain, greater strength. Then a new path, will open up, for them.”

He must have been the star diviner, then. The one who had predicted that Zattsu Suun’s star of bad omen would disappear, and said that he couldn’t read my star at all.

For some reason, I felt a chill run down my spine.

After staring at me for a bit, that older man’s calm yet emotionless gaze turned towards Ai Fa.

“You... you fall under the cat star, do you not?”

“What?”

“After the fell star, disappeared, the fate of, the forest’s edge, shifted. The three lions, awakened, to guide, the future. And if the, cat star, monkey star, and hawk star shine, beside the stars, of the three lions, that future, will

become, even brighter.”

“My apologies, but I have absolutely no idea what you’re saying. What is a cat?”

“There are no cats, at the forest’s edge? They exist in, the eastern kingdom. And they are, a sacred animal,” the star diviner stated, his eyes narrowing in a way that made him look just a bit amused.

Perhaps he was thinking that she really was catlike, just how the stars had stated.

With that, I looked back towards Shumiral.

“Got it... If nothing else, I trust your ability to judge someone’s character. I just need to talk to that Mikel of Turan person if they show up, right?”

“Yes. I’m certain, they’ll be, of help, to you,” Shumiral replied, looking relieved. Then, he extended his right arm out from underneath his long cloak. In his dark, smooth hand, he held a neatly wrapped cloth bundle. “Asuta, this is a gift, for you.”

“Huh? What is it?”

“Wine cups.”

That took me off guard, but I went ahead and unwrapped the package.

What appeared from inside were clear, cylindrical wine cups... The same type of beautiful wine glasses that we had once seen in the Silver Vase’s stall. And it was a set of two.



“Ai Fa, look—” I started to say, turning her way without even thinking.

And sure enough, her eyes had gone wide with surprise, too.

“Asuta, I feel blessed, to have met you. I was, at a loss, as to what, to give you... But then, Radajid told me, that you two, had looked at, these wine cups, with great, enthusiasm.”

That had to be over 20 days ago at this point, right? I mean, it was when Ai Fa and I had stopped by the Silver Vase’s stall, so that I could buy the vegetable knife and the charm necklace.

Now that I thought back on it, I believe Shumiral had been absent and a rather tall easterner had been manning the shop.

“Please, use them. Consider it thanks, for the dinner, you served me, at the Fa house.”

“That seems rather expensive as payment for a single meal...” Ai Fa solemnly stated, her eyes sparkling with joy as she did so.

Shumiral, meanwhile, just gently returned her gaze.

“Price has, nothing to do, with it. I wanted to, give you something, that would make, the two of you, happy. If I thought, a stone by, the roadside, would bring you joy, then I would, gladly give you, that. Its value, is irrelevant.”

“I don’t believe I could ever win an argument against a tongue as skilled as yours,” Ai Fa replied.

Meanwhile, I could feel a lump forming in my throat.

And so, I hurriedly turned around to go pull my own gift out of the back of the wagon, only to find Sheera Ruu already standing there holding a cloth bundle.

After thanking her, I took it and then presented it to Shumiral.

“Shumiral, this is a gift from the Fa house, to everyone in the Silver Vase. It’s jerky I made in a unique way, so please make sure to eat it within the next seven days. It’s a good bit softer than normal jerky, and I think you’d be fine just biting into it as is.”

Shumiral’s eyes narrowed happily, and he said, “You have, my thanks,” as he

accepted the bundle.

That shine in his eyes and those words alone were already more than enough to satisfy me.

Then, the nine men from Sym standing behind him all bowed their heads.

With that, Shumiral handed the bundle to one of his comrades, then stepped in front of Vina Ruu.

“Vina Ruu, my apologies, for my sudden visit, two days ago...”

The eldest Ruu daughter just silently stared back at him.

And Shumiral quietly stared her way, too.

“Tomorrow morning, I will depart, from Genos.”

Vina Ruu remained silent.

“It will be, half a year, before I return. Then after, another month, of business, in Genos, I will leave again, for Sym. That is how, we members of, the Silver Vase, live.”

Still no reply.

“I will stay, for another, half a year, in my home country, after that. Then, I will spend, another year traveling. Until we grow, too old to make, such journeys, we will continue, to live, as such. We all love, to travel. We are, wanderers by nature. The people, of Sym’s capital, a city of stone, do not travel, but for us, people of the grasslands... traveling is, our lives.”

“So you spend longer traveling than you do at home... What a wonderful way of life...” Vina Ruu whispered. “I’ve envied people who live that way, and admired the outside world. But ultimately... I’m still a woman of the forest’s edge.”

There wasn’t any expression whatsoever showing on Vina Ruu’s face. However, it seemed less to me like she wasn’t feeling anything at all, and more like she was desperately holding back her emotions.

“I can’t simply cast my family aside. And for my people, our souls must one day return to our mother, the forest...”

Shumiral gave a small nod as he stared back at her.

“I believe, that is, only proper... But in these, past two days, I have done, much thinking. And at last, I made up, my mind.”

Vina Ruu silently stood there, listening.

“Vina Ruu, I wish, to marry you,” Shumiral clearly stated.

Lala Ruu, Sheera Ruu, and I all held our breath... and Vina Ruu slowly shook her head.

“Were you even listening to what I said...?”

“Yes.”

“Are you telling me to cast aside the forest’s edge...?”

“No.”

“Then you intend to give up your beloved travels...?”

“No.”

“Then what do you even mean...? I don’t understand what you’re saying at all...”

“I cannot quit, my work. But I have, no family, in Sym. My nine comrades, in the Silver Vase, are everything, to me.” Then, Shumiral calmly continued, “So I shall, abandon Sym, and become, a man of, the forest’s edge. I wish to continue, my work with, the Silver Vase as, a person of the forest’s edge.”

With that, Vina Ruu’s expression finally shifted. Her pale eyes stared at Shumiral as if she was looking at something utterly unfathomable.

“But abandoning Sym means giving up your god too, right...? Then all the people around you won’t be ‘comrades’ any more, will they...?”

“That’s right. But they have all, said they, will forgive me. We won’t be comrades, and I won’t, be a man, of the grasslands. But they will, keep working with me, as a man, of the forest’s edge, and a child, of Selva. We won’t, be comrades, but we will still, be friends.”

“That sounds a bit too convenient, doesn’t it...?” Vina Ruu asked, wrapping her arms around her body as if she was shielding herself from the cold.

Shumiral just kept on looking at Vina Ruu with the same gentle gaze as always, though.

“There are two, matters which are, inconvenient. If I am, a westerner, the Silver Vase, will not be, permitted to, enter Mahyudra. And I won’t, be allowed, to live in Sym. But my comrades, said that, was alright. Because even when, we aren’t comrades, we will remain, friends.”

“But...”

“We shall give up, on doing business, in Mahyudra. And my, other comrades, will handle, the preparations, in Sym. Radajid said, as much... He will become, the new leader, of our group, in my place. But I will keep, working hard, in the Silver Vase, as a westerner, and a man, of the forest’s edge.”

Vina Ruu didn’t respond.

“For the people, of the grasslands, our souls, return to those, grass-covered plains. But I offer, my soul, to the forest’s edge. It is painful, to abandon, those grasslands, which were my home, but I believe, I can live happily, with my nine friends, and you, Vina Ruu.”

Both Shumiral’s voice and his gaze felt incredibly calm.

But I was sure that he was trying his hardest to put all his emotions into those awkward western words.

“I said, we spend one year, away, and half a year, back home. But Sym, is far away. Heading between Sym, and Genos, take two months, both ways. So removing that, travel time, it means, eight months spent, away from home. And we spend, two months, working in Genos. It is only, half a year, that we are away, from both Genos, and Sym. I will spend, those six months, working and away, and the rest, of my time, will be spent, living at, the forest’s edge. And I would like, to spend it together, with you, Vina Ruu.”

“But... you can’t hunt giba, can you...?”

“I cannot. But I, travel throughout, the western kingdom. Thanks to that, I can gain, knowledge of, many things. And I can gather, all sorts of, weapons as well. It should certainly, be possible, to bring new, techniques for, hunting giba, to the forest’s edge. That is, my strength.”

“But my father is one of the leading clan heads. There’s no way he’ll accept a foreigner marrying into his house...”

“I will persuade, Donda Ruu. And I promise, I will bring you, happiness. I will demonstrate, my strength, when I return, to Genos, in half a year,” Shumiral calmly stated, removing an accessory from his hand. It was a metallic bracelet with a small pink stone. “Vina Ruu, I pray, for you, to find peace. Will you accept, this gift?”

“I...” Vina Ruu started replying, but she held her tongue.

After staying silent for a few long moments, though, she glanced up at Shumiral.

“I have a bit of trouble handling folks like you, whose emotions I can’t read...”

Shumiral tilted his head, looking a touch confused. But then, he suddenly broke out in a smile.

“If I am, to become a man, of the forest’s edge, then I shall strive, to let my, emotions show. It’s truly embarrassing, but I also, believe it’s, very important.”

It was a pure, gentle smile that was every bit a match for Sanjura’s.

Vina Ruu’s eyebrows drooped, and she looked completely at a loss.

“I worried over, the matter, for several days... Actually, I did so, for the whole month, but it got worse, when you, were injured. But I know. I need you, Vina Ruu. I wish to be, together with you.”

“But...”

“Vina Ruu, I am glad, to see you, thinking seriously, on the matter. Will you, ponder it, until I return, to Genos, in half a year? It would make me, very happy, to receive, your answer, when that time comes.”

Shumiral timidly reached out his hand and grabbed hold of Vina Ruu’s. In her palm, he placed the silver bracelet he had been gripping.

“For the next, half year, I promise, to think of you, every night. And Vina Ruu... I love you.”

As she held the bracelet tight, Vina Ruu suddenly hung her head, hiding her

expression from view.

After staring at her for some time, Shumiral finally turned back towards me. And on his face, he wore a gentle smile.

“Well then, we will, head back. We will, meet again, in half a year. Asuta, Vina Ruu, Ai Fa, Ludo Ruu... and those of you, whose names I, do not know, I wish you all, good health. And I will pray, for a bright future, for the forest’s edge.”

“Yeah, you take care... I’ll be waiting for the day we meet again.”

Shumiral nodded, and then he turned his back to us. The rest of his comrades gave one last small bow, then also did an about face.

I just watched silently as the group of ten tall easterners clad in leather cloaks walked away.

This really was farewell.

Even at the earliest, it would be half a year before we met again.

By this point, I had lived here in this land for over two months.

Half a year from now, we could see each other again.

And a year from this point, I may be able to reunite with Pops’s group.

But still... It wouldn’t be strange in the least for me to suddenly disappear right here and now.

No one knew when they may die, so perhaps we were all in the same boat. But still, I just couldn’t completely wipe away the unease that I felt.

If that happened, this really would be goodbye forever. I wouldn’t ever again hear that calm voice or look into his gentle eyes.

Would I be able to see how things turned out between Shumiral and Vina Ruu?

The very thought was enough to cause me to feel a crushing sensation in my chest.

“Asuta, are you crying...?” Ai Fa asked.

“As if, you dummy,” I replied.

My clan head didn't say anything further.

But for a moment, I thought she had reached out with her warm fingers to wipe beneath my eyes, only for her to roughly ruffle my hair instead.

With that, the blue month, which had been filled with all sorts of encounters and farewells, finally came to a close.

Intermezzo: The Construction Group from the Southern Kingdom

That Asuta of the Fa clan really was an oddball, Balan absentmindedly thought while riding along in the swaying totes-drawn wagon.

His group was on their way back home to Nellwea, having finished up work in Genos. They had headed out first thing in the morning on this, the first day of the white month, and by now the sun was already nearing its peak. The stone highway was even, so the wagon wasn't swaying all that heavily, and all of his men were already snoring away.

Balan's construction group had stayed in Genos for a full month and a half while carrying out their work, from the middle of the green month all the way till the end of the blue month. Nearly all of the buildings in the post town were made in a Jagar style, and so his group visited once a year in order to do repairs.

It was during this trip, though, that they met the mysterious young man known as Asuta of the Fa clan. And boy was he a wild one.

In terms of appearance, he just looked like an ordinary westerner. Sure, his black hair and eyes were a little bit unusual, but his skin color, face, and build all seemed entirely ordinary. Apparently he wasn't actually born on this continent, but there was nothing that showed that just from looking at him. In fact, if someone said he was a pureblooded westerner, nobody would think twice about it.

But it wasn't his outward appearance that was strange. It was what was inside, instead.

Of all things, Asuta was living as a person of the forest's edge and running stalls together with them.

The people of the forest's edge were a tribe of traitors who once abandoned Jagar. But with that said, apparently they had lived since ancient times in the ominous black forest, rather than being normal citizens of the south. Since

terrifying man-eating black apes also lived in that place, ordinary southerners would never so much as set foot there.

Eighty years in the past, though, the black forest disappeared. It was hard to tell what was true and what was false, but apparently it burned down in the midst of the war with Sym. However, since Balan was born in the peaceful town of Nellwea near the western edge of the nation, all he had ever heard were rumors.

At any rate, those folks from the black forest had lost their home, and so they moved to the Morga forest's edge in the Western Kingdom of Selva. Rather than living like proper citizens of Jagar and tilling fields or fighting against Sym, they chose to flee to a whole other country entirely.

Thanks to that, they ended up changing gods, which was something to be avoided above all else here on this continent. And as a result, they earned the scorn of both the citizens of Jagar and Selva.

Naturally, Balan had shunned the people of the forest's edge, too.

However, if he had to say, that was more due to the present state of things than anything that had happened in the past.

Put simply, he just plain disliked them.

He couldn't help but think of folks from Sym when looking at their dark skin, and they tended to act pretty similarly, too. Folks from Jagar like him really hated people who acted all detached and above it all, so you couldn't look at them and tell what they were really thinking.

On top of all that, the people of the forest's edge seemed to keep their distance from others, even here in Genos. They frequently came to the post town to take care of tasks like selling giba horns and purchasing salt and vegetables, but they never opened up to anyone. Frankness was seen as a virtue for the people of Jagar. Being so closed off was what they couldn't stand most of all.

And those were the sort of folks that Asuta kid was hanging out with.

Thanks to that, their initial meeting went just about the worst way possible. In fact, he really couldn't stand the kid for a while there. He had some really curvy

girls of the forest's edge with him, and he was selling cooking that used giba meat, which had a terrible reputation about it. For Balan, having that kind of stupidity thrust in his face had seriously annoyed him. To top it all off, the first bit of giba meat Asuta fed him was all mushy and had this strong, unfamiliar taste about it, which made the kid's actions seem all the more ridiculous.

Now I'm the one who looks ridiculous, ending up going out of my way to buy giba jerky after all that, he absentmindedly thought while staring at a big bag sitting in a corner of the wagon.

It was only those first few days that Balan took exception to the idea of giba meat. But before long, Asuta started selling a new dish using myamuu, and that was enough to smash all his stubbornness to smithereens.

That dish had been so tasty that it left Balan at a loss for words. It was so delicious that he had trouble believing it was the same giba meat he had tried previously.

And as he ate giba cooking more and more, that peculiar taste stopped bothering him so much, till he got to the point that he even went and stocked up on giba jerky.

What really settled it, though, was the cooking that got sold through the inn.

Balan's group always stayed at The Great Southern Tree, and once the place started selling Asuta's cubed giba meat stew, it had even more of an impact on him.

That dish used plenty of tau oil, and when he tasted it, it was so delicious his eyes almost popped right on out of his head. Even though tau oil was an ingredient from Jagar, he had never tasted anything so good even back home. And he certainly never had a chance to eat such first-rate cooking in the Genos post town before.

To be frank, he found the food back in his hometown of Nellwea far tastier than the stuff from the post town too, though. Genos was a prosperous region, and the fuwano and fruit wine and the like were all high quality, and it wasn't like the fruit and veggie selection available was all that bad. The meats and seasonings, though, were pretty dire.

He could count the number of inns that used tau oil on one hand, and he hadn't even seen any places use sugar or honey. Despite how close Genos was to Jagar, apparently that sort of ingredient only ever made it to the castle town. And Balan's group was only allowed in the post town, where they hadn't seen such things even once.

As for the meat, there was a lot of karon leg meat around, which you didn't often get a chance to eat in Jagar, so it might not have been so bad in and of itself. But since they didn't have any tau oil or sugar and just used salt and herbs for flavor, even though the fuwano and fruit wine were good stuff and they used plenty of vegetables it really made for some poor meals.

But then Asuta's cooking appeared, tasting positively outstanding.

The stuff he made just using aria, tarapa, myamuu, and the like was already fantastic, but when he went and started using tau oil to add some of that flavor from back home, well... Balan certainly didn't have any complaints, to say the least.

And it seemed that giba meat really was a first-rate ingredient, too. The reason he had found it unpleasant at first was because the kid had prepared it in that weird way of slicing it up all finely and balling it back up. But when it was prepared normally, it was far more satisfying than any kimyuus or karon meat.

Sure, maybe the flavor was a bit on the strong side. But he didn't mind that at all when the kid used strong flavorings like myamuu and tau oil, and now that he'd gotten used to it, he'd even grown fond of the taste of the meat itself. On top of that, there was plenty of fat on it and it had just the right level of chewiness, so he really couldn't see anything to complain about.

Man, that sure is aggravating, Balan thought to himself, feeling like he had lost somehow.

He had no intention of getting deeply involved with Asuta or the people of the forest's edge to begin with. And yet, Asuta had specifically called for him and made him try that new dish.

Balan had been thoroughly annoyed and ready to never go anywhere near the kid's stalls again, but Asuta went and begged him to give it a taste. When he did so and was taken completely off guard by that new myamuu giba dish, the

boy's eyes were positively sparkling as he wore a big old smile.

"I felt very frustrated when you said it was bad. But thanks to that, I decided to think more deeply about it. And so, I'm very grateful to you," Asuta had said. It seemed like he was somehow struggling to express his feelings. Folks from Jagar always wore their thoughts openly on their faces, but for some reason other people found that hard to do.

From that day on, Balan started visiting Asuta's stall each and every day. If he recalled correctly, that had been around when the green month changed over to the blue, meaning he had kept on eating Asuta's cooking for a month straight.

And as all that was going on, Balan had steadily grown more and more familiar with those other folks from the forest's edge, too. Not just the girls who helped with the stalls, either, as there were also those fierce-looking hunters who hung around.

Apparently, they were there because some criminals from the forest's edge had threatened the post town. And halfway through the blue month, one of those criminals was cut down just a little ways off the main road.

Thanks to all that, Balan learned even more about the people of the forest's edge.

For example, some of them were as direct as anyone from Sym, or even Jagar.

It still seemed like a lot of them were pretty darn stubborn, but hey, it was not like guys from down south had room to complain about that. And apparently the reason they didn't make idle chatter was less that they were all demure or whatever, and more that they were a proud people who firmly believed that they were right in their actions.

Plus, though the girls at the stalls had seemed awfully unsociable at first, as time passed they started smiling more and more. And they were all pretty and hard workers from the get go, too. By the end, it had reached the point that he was thinking stupid stuff like how he'd love to have his son back home marry a girl like them.

But just when Balan's group had finally started to truly understand the

mysterious people of the forest's edge, the blue month came to an end.

As he felt the wind blowing in through the window and tickling his hair and moustache, Balan gave a snort of "Hmph!" to no one in particular.

Then, perhaps awoken by that, one of his men lying atop a rug slowly sat up.

"What, you've been awake all this time, Pops? You've sure got a lot of energy considering how early we set out." It was the vice-leader of the group, Aldas. He was from Nellwea too, and they'd been stuck with one another as business partners for over ten years now. "Ugh, my head's still aching. I really did drink too much last night."

"Hmph. You had me worried you were going to use up all the coins you earned in Genos in a single night."

"You're exaggerating, there. I mean, 10 or 20 bottles of fruit wine hardly cost anything at all," Aldas replied with a hearty chuckle, leaning up against one of the walls.

Southerners were known for generally having small builds, but Aldas was a rather large man. However, he was also skilled enough with his hands to be called a master when it came to construction.

"We worked hard for a whole month and a half. So what's wrong with really living it up on our last night in town...? Still, that Asuta's cooking sure was tasty. We probably ate up all the giba meat in the inn ourselves yesterday, huh?"

"Hmph..."

"Ugh, I'm feeling hungry just thinking about it. Is the sun gonna be at its peak soon? We're not in any particular rush today, so I'd like to light up a fire and have a nice relaxed meal." Rather than waiting for Balan's response, Aldas then turned towards the driver's seat and shouted out, "Hey! Let's eat lunch soon! If you see a good spot, I'd like to light a fire. What do you say?"

"Right. Well, I don't think there should be any danger around here," the youth tasked with handling the totos cheerfully responded.

Before long, the wagon came to a stop in the middle of the highway.

"Hey, everybody up! Anyone still snoozing away's missing a meal!" Aldas

shouted, and everyone else sluggishly started rousing themselves.

When they got down out of the wagon, they found a desolate desert off to the right of the highway, and a thicket to the left.

Past the thicket to the north stood the imposing Mount Morga. Somehow, it always gave off an oppressive, ominous feeling.

Off to the right, all the trees had been chopped down for lumber, leaving nothing but dead earth. The ground was parched and cracked, and it was hard to imagine any crops ever surviving there.

“What, we’re taking a break? Sure seems like you’re going on a pretty laid-back little trip here, huh?” a voice called out from above. It hadn’t come from the wagon, but rather from one of the bodyguards atop their own tolos. The stretch of highway connecting Genos and Nellwea wasn’t known for being especially dangerous, but the group still hired the two guards to be safe.

“We should be able to make it to the next post town before the sun sets today. So it just makes sense to want to eat a nice, relaxed lunch on a day like this at least, right? We’re going to go gather up some dry branches, so just hold on for a bit, okay?”

“In that case, let one of us accompany you. After all, there’s no guarantee that those carrion-eating mundt won’t show up in a place like this.”

With that, one of the bodyguards got down from his tolos and headed off into the thicket with Aldas’s group.

Meanwhile, the group moved the two wagons off of the highway over to the forested side, and let the tolos eat up too. The big birds sure did look carefree and relaxed as they pecked away at the nearby leaves.

“Man, this area sure is peaceful. It’s a big change from the hustle and bustle of Genos,” stated a youth with a big stretch, now free of having to handle the tolos.

Yeah, it certainly was nice and calm. Maybe all the other travelers on the highway were taking a break around now too, as no wagons seemed to be passing by. Wild birds danced about the clear blue sky, and there was even a pleasant, gentle breeze blowing past.

“Still, this time around sure was enjoyable. It’s the first time I’ve ever felt disappointed having to leave Genos.”

“Hmph. Guess you can’t go fooling around so easily with your parents around.”

“Well yeah, but more than that, it’s sad thinking how we won’t get to eat giba cooking anymore,” the youth replied with a pained sigh. “Even if it’s still giba meat, there’s not going to be all that much of a difference between it and karon when we’re talking jerky. Man, you think we’ll ever be able to eat giba meat in Jagar, too?”

“Nellwea’s the closest town to here, and even then, it takes half a month by wagon. If you don’t want jerky, you’d have to transport live giba all that way.”

“Hehe, think I’d have to pass on that one.”

As they were having that conversation, Aldas’s group had returned. There were six of them, excluding the bodyguard, and their arms were full of dead branches.

“This should be plenty, right? Hey, someone get me the pot!”

“Ah, right!”

The youth went hurrying back into the wagon, and handed what had been asked for to his comrades.

“This bag is the giba jerky, right? But what’s this small one?”

“Ah, that’s some jerky that Asuta prepared special. He said we had to eat it within seven days, so I guess we should hurry up and dig in.”

First they piled up the dried branches on the ground, and then surrounded them with stones. Next they placed a pot atop those stones and scooped some water out of a barrel. In no time at all, there was steam rising from the pot.

At that point they tossed in dried aria and poitan, only for Aldas to open up the small package and pause, tilting his head.

“Hmm? Now that I think about it, we were told this jerky was soft enough that you could just bite into it as is. Kinda feels like a waste to go throwing it into poitan soup.”

“Yeah, that mushy poitan soup will ruin the taste of the meat. But still, I don’t exactly want to go eating the stuff without any jerky in it at all...”

“Then how about we add half the normal amount of regular jerky into the pot, then we each get a half serving of the special stuff to chew on?” Aldas proposed.

Another of their comrades nodded, and started shaving off chunks of the normal jerky with a knife. As he tossed those into the boiling pot, yet another of the group added ground myamuu. Poitan soup was dull like muddy water, so if you didn’t add in herbs with a strong flavor or tau oil or something, it wasn’t all that edible.

“Hey, you’ve been saying ‘giba, giba’ for a while now. That’s not giba jerky, is it?” one of the bodyguards asked in a suspicious tone.

The men were both skilled swordsmen introduced to them through The Great Southern Tree. They were westerners who had come drifting in from some other town, and both had dark brown hair. Apparently they had originally been mercenaries, but their leather chest plates and sheathes all seemed quite high quality, clearly setting them apart from the sorts of ruffians you saw all throughout the post town.

“Ah, since you guys spent some time in Genos too, you must’ve heard tell about giba cooking, right? We ate at the stalls that sold the stuff each and every day.”

“We heard some rumors of course, but we never had any interest in actually eating the stuff. We’ll just use the jerky we brought along instead.”

“Hmm? You weren’t born in Genos, but you’ve still got an issue with giba?”

“Well, it’s not like you ever hear anything good about giba or the people of the forest’s edge, y’know?”

With that, Balan started getting annoyed.

“Then let me just ask, have any giba or folks from the forest’s edge ever caused you all trouble? If not, then you’re balking at the idea of giba meat over nothing but gossip, aren’t ya?”

“That’s not quite it, but I just can’t see any reason to go and eat something like giba meat of my own free will. I mean, if I eat it and it turns out it’s inedible and wrecks my stomach, then I won’t be able to carry out my job.”

“Hmph! You work as a bodyguard with a stomach that weak? Sure makes you sound awfully unreliable.”

Now it was the bodyguards knitting their brows.

Seeing that, Aldas interjected, “Come on, now. Nobody’s forcing you to eat giba meat. And we’ll add the cost of the jerky you eat to your payment. And Pops, there’s no reason to get so worked up, right...?”

“Hmph! What’s wrong with calling them unreliable when it’s true? If they’re afraid of dead giba, then what makes you think they can handle mundt or bandits?”

“Hey, that’s a little much.”

“Then just shut it and try some giba meat, already! And don’t go blaming me if it’s so tasty that your legs give out on you,” Balan retorted, snatching the bundle Aldas was holding and grabbing some of the specially prepared jerky. The slimy feel of it took him off guard, however. It had so much fat clinging to it that it was almost as if he was holding raw meat.

Looking at it closer, the inside of the package was coated with glossy suurub leaves. That must have been necessary thanks to just how fatty the jerky was.

“That’s jerky? That stuff’s clearly only been half dried.”

“Like we said, it was prepared special! It only lasts seven days, but in exchange, it preserves the natural tastiness of the meat!” Balan snapped back, biting into the chunk of jerky.

It certainly was soft enough to chew through even without boiling. It probably had around the same level of toughness as meat that had been thoroughly grilled.

As for the taste... it had left Balan at a loss for words.

It was incredibly salty. And it had a strong herb smell about it, too. It must have been made by drawing out the moisture with a heaping amount of salt,

and then smoking it with herbs.

But it wasn't lacking at all in that delicious giba meat flavor.

In fact, it felt more like the flavor had been condensed. When he bit into it, the fat came gushing out, filling him with an incomparable pleasure.

Despite being so salty, the taste of the meat itself most definitely remained. Apparently the flavor of giba was strong enough that even being heavily salted and doused in herbs couldn't cover it up. At the very least, he certainly couldn't imagine karon or kimyuus meat coming out the same even if you used a similar process on them.

"What is it, Pops? Asuta made that jerky special, so it couldn't possibly have turned out bad, right?"

"O-Of course it didn't! Hey, make way!" Balan suddenly declared, pushing aside the youth who was minding the flame and leaning in. He pulled out a knife and cut off a chunk of the meat he had bit into, then stabbed through the slice and held it out over the fire.

Fat started oozing out of it and dripping down. And as a satisfying sizzling sound came from the fire, a powerful aroma began to fill the air.

"Hey, that seriously smells just as delicious as normal grilled meat, doesn't it?" one of the group stated, while having to swallow as his mouth was watering so much.

Balan pulled back his knife, blew on the freshly heated jerky, then tossed it into his mouth.

Just as he had expected, it tasted even better than just eating it cold.

It was just jerky made with salt and herbs, yet it was tasty enough to be a match for a full-fledged meal. After giving a hearty sigh, Balan just stood there unable to speak for a moment.

"Hey, Pops, don't hoard it! Let us eat some too!"

"Hey, somebody go get the metal skewers!"

The members of the construction group looked about ready to brawl as they started splitting up the specially-prepared jerky.

The pot was moved to the side, so that numerous skewers could be held out above the flame. And the bodyguards looked downright astounded as they stared at the sight.

“Man, this is good!”

“It’s tasty enough that I’d pay coins to buy it from a stall. I sure do want to drink some fruit wine, though.”

“Hey, you’re eating too much there, aren’t you? Are you planning on eating all of it on the very first day?” Aldas chided while wearing a big grin on his face.

As Balan came back to his senses, he snatched back the bundle of jerky, shot his comrades who were behaving like children a sidelong glare, and then walked over towards the bodyguards.

“I was rude earlier, so sorry. I hope you’ll just brush it off as our way of doing things in Jagar and forgive me for that.”

“A-Ah, it’s no big deal...”

“But let me ask again... Would you two like to give this a try, too? As you can see, it’ll probably be gone by tomorrow, so it’s pretty much now or never. And I think there’s value in at least trying it.”

With that, the men shared a troubled look.

And as he looked at them, Balan smiled with the typical southern frankness.

“The people of the forest’s edge are westerners. That makes you countrymen, doesn’t it? And when your countrymen went and made something this delicious, it seems pretty darn stupid to go hating on it without even giving it a try. If you find it gross, then feel free to complain as much as you like. And if you think we’re trying to trick you, then just eat it and see.”

The men didn’t respond.

“Honestly, I’m jealous of you guys. After you deliver us to Nellwea, you’re returning to Genos, aren’t you? Go ahead and eat some of this so you can see just how blessed you really are,” Balan said, shoving the bundle at the men and then turning back to his group. “Hey, if you all are satisfied, then put the pot back over the flame! There’s still giba meat in there, after all! And so we want

to make sure to eat every last drop of it, right?”

“Yeah!” his men cheerfully responded, throwing up their arms.

Balan and his men surely wouldn’t forget the deliciousness of giba meat before they visited Asuta again next year. And as they sipped away at the giba soup, they couldn’t help but wonder just how skilled the boy would grow by then.

Afterword

You have my deepest thanks for picking up this book, the ninth volume of *Cooking with Wild Game*.

This work isn't exactly neatly divided up, but I would say that we've now passed the "Settlement at the Forest's Edge" and "Genos Post Town" arcs and have entered into the "Cyclaeus" arc. After all, he had been nothing but a name up till now, but the time has finally come for a direct confrontation with the bastard himself.

But with that said, the main character of our story is ultimately a chef. And so I wanted to have Asuta carry out the work he should be doing rather than having him swap out his cooking knife for a sword or a halberd.

This also turned out to be a volume where I ended up introducing one new character after another. Shumiral and Pops's groups may be leaving Genos, but a variety of newcomers certainly have come in to fill the void.

They all definitely have their quirks, and I hope you'll enjoy seeing just what sort of bonds they'll form with Asuta and the people of the forest's edge.

It was actually just today that I got sent the final versions of the black and white illustrations. Thanks to that, I was able to check how the designs for Cyclaeus and the other new characters turned out.

I have a tendency to request a lot of details with such things, so I know I always put quite a burden on my illustrator, Kochimo. But that effort certainly doesn't seem to be wasted, as the pictures turned out wonderful as always. And so, you have my deep, deep gratitude, Kochimo.

And as you can likely guess from the title, this time around the intermezzo centers on Pops's group from the south.

The initial plan had been for a sweet story about Shin and Lala Ruu, but thanks to page counts and such, I ended up having to abandon it. But I certainly intend to go back to that when I get another chance.

Even in the web version Pops and his group haven't yet reappeared. It's really been a year and a half or thereabouts that they've been gone. And so, let there be light on those middle-aged men! At least, that was what I was thinking, and I certainly burned through those pages awfully quick.

To be honest, these afterwords go into the excess pages left over thanks to the bookmaking process. So if I insisted I want it to be longer, that would require adding another 16 pages, which would be quite an issue.

Now then... As always, let me finish by giving thanks to my editor at Hobby Japan, my illustrator Kochimo, everyone else involved with the production of this book, and of course all of you who purchased it.

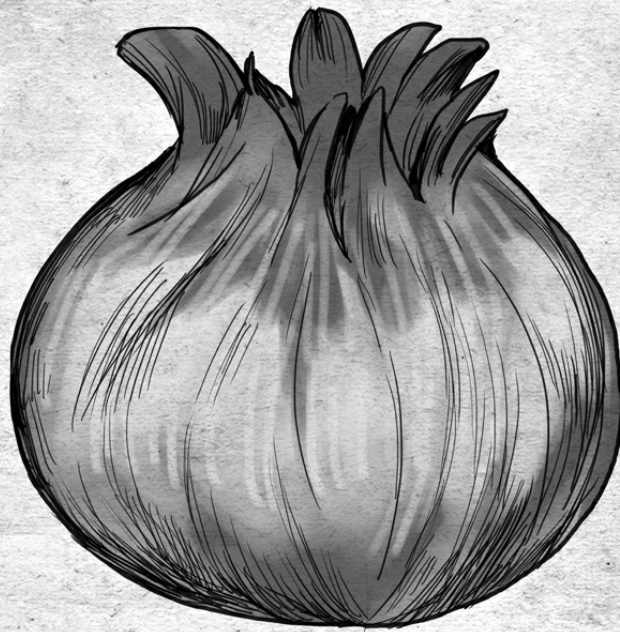
I hope to see you all again with the next volume!

November 2016,

EDA

COOKING WITH WILD GAME

VEGETABLE REFERENCE MATERIALS



ARIA

PRICE & ... 5 FOR ONE RED COIN

STRONGLY RESEMBLES AN ONION IN TERMS OF SIZE, SHAPE, AND TASTE. LIGHT GREEN IN COLOR. INCREDIBLY NUTRITIOUS. JUST EATING THREE PER DAY IS SUPPOSEDLY ENOUGH TO PROVIDE ALL ESSENTIAL VITAMINS.

POITAN



3 PRICE & ... 4 FOR ONE RED COIN

STRONGLY RESEMBLES A POTATO IN TERMS OF SIZE AND SHAPE. CREAM COLORED, WITH NO DISCERNIBLE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE SKIN AND BODY. NOT SUITED TO BEING EATEN RAW. CRUMBLES WHEN BOILED, WHICH IS USUALLY DONE TO MAKE A BROTH.

SEEMINGLY PROVIDES ALL NECESSARY CARBOHYDRATES BY EATING TWO A DAY. BOTH IT AND ARIA ARE INCREDIBLY CHEAP, MAKING THEM STAPLE FOODS AT THE FOREST'S EDGE.

Bonus Short Story

The Wanderer and the Youngest Son of the Ruu

In a corner of the Ruu settlement's plaza, Ludo Ruu and Kamyua Yoshu were idly standing beside one another. Their gazes were fixed on three men from the branch houses training to ride a totos. And the women with free time were all watching, too, along with the younger children.

"That's hunters of the forest's edge for you. At this rate, they'll be ready to head out of Genos tomorrow morning with no issues at all," Kamyua Yoshu muttered casually.

The men of the branch houses were practicing totos riding in order to help Kamyua Yoshu search for a woman. In all likelihood, this was the first time in 80 years that any people of the forest's edge would be leaving Genos territory.

"Hey, I heard you wander around the world for a living, right?" Ludo Ruu asked, sounding rather bored as he observed the proceedings.

Kamyua Yoshu replied, "Yeah," with a casual nod. "I don't have a home to return to, after all. I'm rather taken with Genos, though, and this honestly may just be the longest I've ever stayed in one place."

"Huh. So if you don't have a home, you must not have any family either, then."

"That's right. My disciple Leito is the closest thing I've got on that front."

That boy Leito was the one in the middle of the plaza giving totos-riding lessons. He had accompanied Kamyua Yoshu to the forest's edge this time around.

"Why are you asking all that out of the blue, anyway? I've got no reason to lie... anymore."

"It's not that I doubt your words. I just can't even imagine a life without a home or family, so I was feeling a little curious."

“I see. So you’re interested in the life of a wanderer, then?” Kamyua Yoshu asked with a nonchalant grin.

“Not at all,” Ludo Ruu said, turning the man’s way and shrugging his shoulders. “The souls of my people must return to the forest. And we value ties of blood above all else, so I’ve got no interest whatsoever in becoming a wanderer.”

“Hmm, that’s pretty much what I expected. But that way of thinking is hard for someone who abandoned his home like me to imagine.”

“Well, that said, if anybody wanted to live outside of the forest’s edge, I’d send them off with a smile.”

Kamyua Yoshu’s eyes opened wide with surprise.

“Are you talking about those men from the branch houses? I can’t imagine they’ll be that charmed by the wanderer’s life just by heading outside Genos for a bit.”

“No, not them. And besides... I can’t imagine anyone around here could bring themselves to abandon their family, anyway,” Ludo Ruu said with a big stretch. “Well, the future’s all up to the forest’s guidance anyway... And now I’m hungry, so I’m going to see if I can get something to eat.”

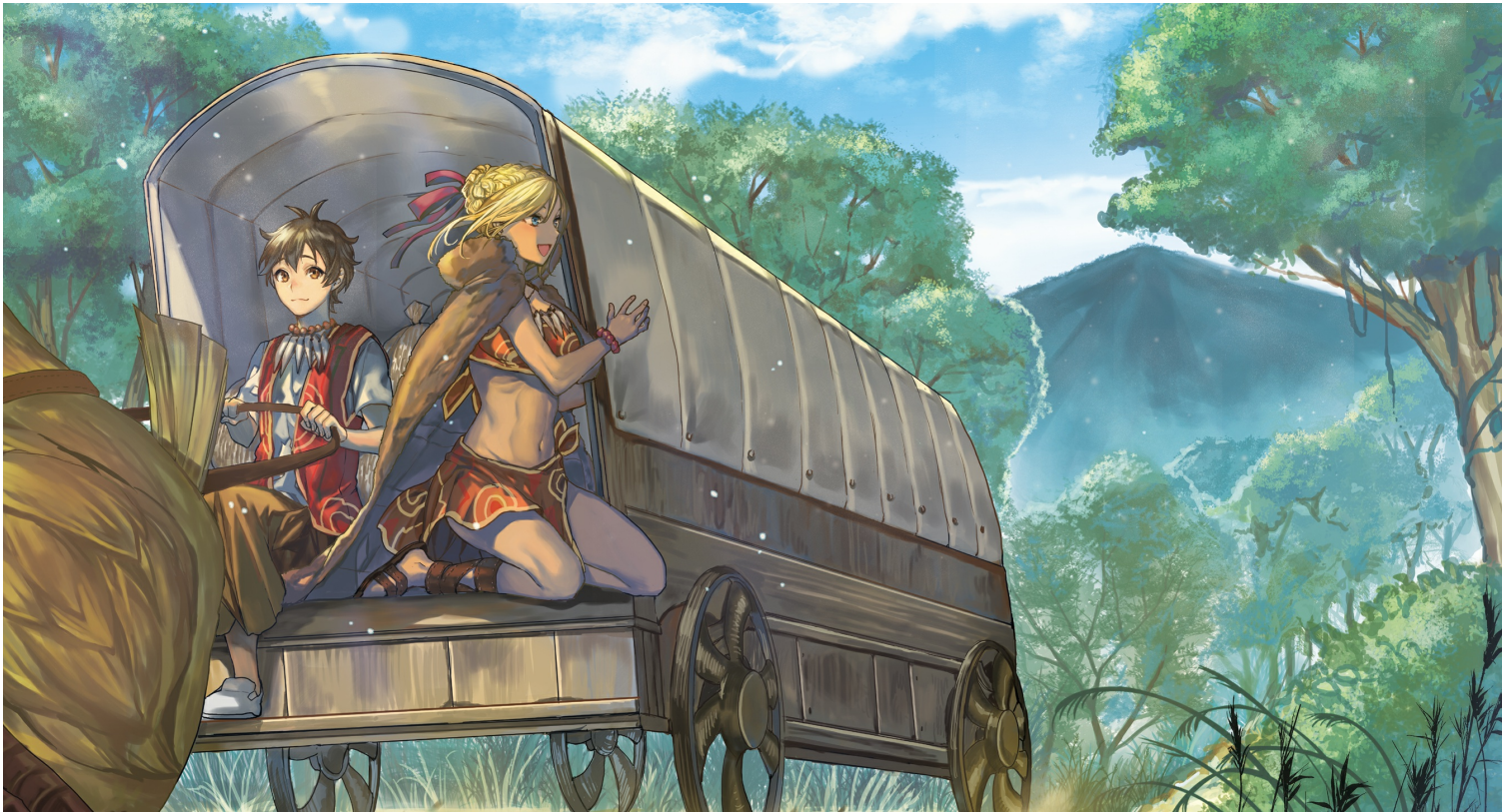
“Didn’t you already eat a ton of hamburger steak, Ludo Ruu? Even though you only let me have a single bite...”

“Hey, I gave you that bite, so don’t complain,” Ludo Ruu snapped back, taking notice out of the corner of his eye that Kamyua Yoshu was still wearing his usual casual grin.

There was someone from town right in the middle of the settlement at the forest’s edge, with a relaxed smile on his face. And that Shumiral guy from yesterday hadn’t faltered in the least even when faced with Ludo Ruu’s dad and older brother.

It had been eighty years since a person of the forest’s edge had set foot outside of Genos, and probably just as long since a townspeople was invited here, let alone was bold enough to accept.

Well, regardless of how everything plays out, at least I won't be bored for the time being, Ludo Ruu thought to himself, heading for the kitchen once again along with the unusual visitor.







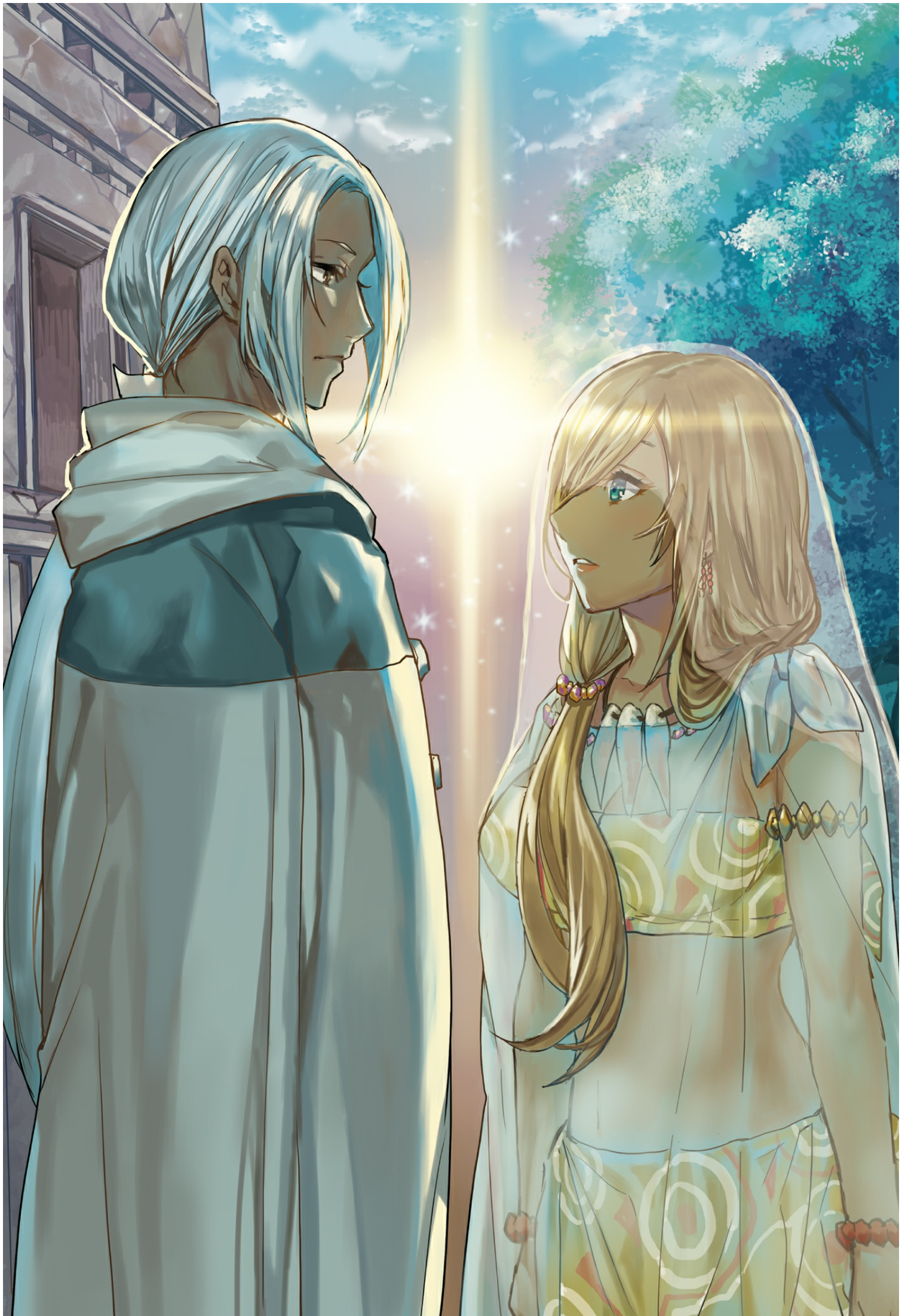


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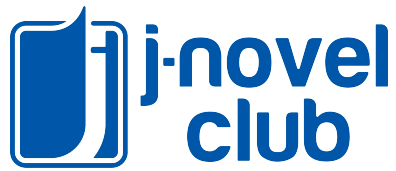
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Cooking with Wild Game: Volume 9

by EDA

Translated by Matthew Warner Edited by Adam Fogle

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